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## **Chapter One**

### **Pulling Focus on Figueroa**

Figueroa ha sido no solo sinónimo del cine mexicano sino de México.

(Figueroa is not only a synonym for Mexican Cinema but also for  
Mexico itself.)

(Tomás Pérez Turrent, 1997a)

Cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa (1907-1997) is widely recognised as one of the founding fathers of Mexican cinema and has come to occupy a privileged position in the national cultural pantheon. Given the auteurist inclinations of much film scholarship, with its focus on the director's creative input into the making of the moving image, this is, to say the least, unusual. Critics have tended to overlook the collaborative nature of creative filmmaking and whilst they might praise the visual quality of a film, it is rare that they grant the cinematographer more than a brief mention. Even the few figures in the industry with a similar status to Figueroa, such as Gregg Toland (US), Sven Nikqvist (Sweden), Vittorio Storaro (Italy), Freddie Young and Jack Cardiff (UK), have not received the critical and popular recognition in their native countries to compare with the celebrity that Figueroa has sustained in Mexico. More importantly, neither have these cinematographers' images played such a major part in the formation of their respective national imaginaries in the way that those of Figueroa have done.

Numerous books, television programmes, journal articles and magazines, dedicated to Figueroa and his work, demonstrate the popular esteem in which the man and his contribution to cinematography are held and the publication of an edited edition of his memoirs in 2005 reconfirmed this status.<sup>i</sup>

Retrospectives of his work take place regularly at home and abroad and

exhibitions of stills taken from his light tests are organised.<sup>ii</sup> Reproductions of his images hang in cantinas and shops reverentially named *Café Enamorada*, *Restaurant María Candelaria* and *Abarrotes La Perla*. Throughout his career, Figueroa received numerous accolades, nationally and internationally and in 2007 there are plans to celebrate his centenary.<sup>iii</sup> In short, both Figueroa and the images he created have been central to Mexican culture and society for over sixty years. They are icons of the national cinema and as Pérez Turrent suggests, have become synonymous with Mexico itself in the popular imagination.

My aim in this book is to 'pull focus' on Figueroa's work to suggest reasons why his images have acquired such iconic status. My intention is not to situate Figueroa as a substitute auteur, but rather to critically recognise that film production is inherently collaborative and, in so doing, acknowledge the close creative partnership between the cinematographer and the director in the production of meaning in a film. On close examination of Figueroa's work, fissures appear between the images and the themes of the films which compromise the post-revolutionary nationalism that previous writers have uncritically assumed they embody. On further investigation, these contradictions reveal a complex set of transnationalist influences and contexts which are present, not only in Figueroa's work, but also within the Mexican film industry itself.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, Pérez Turrent's suggestion that Figueroa 'is Mexico' transforms into a conundrum. Is Figueroa Mexico? Is Mexico Figueroa's? If the cinematographer is associated with the Mexico he created, what is that Mexico, how did he produce it and why? Furthermore, despite the constant acknowledgement of the importance of his work, it is significant that, to date, there has been little in-depth critical analysis of the images that investigates this cultural puzzle. Nor, indeed, have the reasons as to why Figueroa is so central to the cinematic and cultural pantheon of Mexico been explored. How and why has his work become so integral to visual constructions of national identity?

The beauty of the images and the charismatic personality that produced them subtly seduce and it is easy to fall under their spell. Much of the work on Figueroa has been anecdotal and biographical.<sup>v</sup> Although there is much of interest in these books and articles, ultimately they perpetuate the mythic status that has built up around Figueroa and his work. To date, the only critical study of the cinematographer's work is by Charles Ramírez Berg in two short articles in which he constructs Figueroa as the innovator of a Mexican cinematic classicism.<sup>vi</sup> However, despite the value of his critical analysis of the cinematographer, Ramírez Berg uncritically employs the 'quasi-metaphysical terms' of *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano* and consequently falls into the trap of reiterating post-revolutionary nationalist ideology that obscures any empirical analysis (Knight, 1992: 99).

Rather than follow the biographical, anecdotal or national trajectories, this book explores Figueroa's work from new perspectives, to suggest a wider range of angles from which to view his films. This is not to deny the validity of biography for an understanding of Figueroa's work. In fact, I shall first give a brief overview of Figueroa's cinematographic, political and social development in order to contextualise the elevation of his status in Mexican culture and to clarify the context within which his images were made and functioned. I will then go on to examine how Figueroa attained iconic status, which is crucial for it reveals why he is so central to Mexican culture and, consequently, what his images have come to represent in the national imagination.

### **Figueroa's Life and Career**

Orphaned at an early age, Figueroa and his brother, Roberto, were brought up by their father's sister, Sara, in Mexico City. In 1924, at the age of seventeen, Figueroa was accepted at the national music conservatory to study violin. At the same time he enrolled for art classes at the Academia San Carlos and at the Eduardo Guerrero studios to learn photography (Figueroa, 1988: 16).

However, shortly after he started his studies, his aunt died. The lawyer who administered the Figueroas' inheritance had mortgaged the property left to them

and had invested the proceeds badly, leaving the brothers insolvent. Destitute, they had no choice but to abandon their studies and start work.

Figueroa initially worked with a photographer in a studio that made fast-turnaround portraits. The pace of work and the demands of commercial photography would inform the speed of his later work as a cinematographer and, indeed, later in his career he became renowned for his speed and economy on set (Figueroa, 1988: 20). He subsequently worked with José Guadalupe Velasco, the first photographer in Mexico to use artificial lighting. Velasco created highly stylised and theatrical portraits and during his time with the photographer, Figueroa became fascinated with the relationship between lighting and printing processes, factors that became fundamental to his working practices as a cinematographer (Figueroa, 1988: 24).

In the early 1930s, an old school friend, Gilberto Martínez Solares, introduced him to the Canadian émigré cinematographer, Alex Phillips, who employed him to take the stills on *Revolución* (Miguel Contreras Torres, 1932) and within two years Figueroa had progressed from stills man to lighting engineer on *El escándalo* (Chano Urueta, 1933). In 1935, he secured a grant from the newly established Cinematográfico Latino America SA (CLASA) to study in Hollywood with Gregg Toland, who became his friend, mentor and a foremost influence on Figueroa's development as a cinematographer.<sup>vii</sup>

On his return to Mexico, he worked for director of photography, Jack Draper, as a camera operator on Fernando de Fuentes's *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (1935) and following the film, he formed a cooperative with de Fuentes, Alfonso Sánchez Tello and Miguel Delgado to make *Allá en el Rancho Grande* directed by de Fuentes in 1936 (Figueroa, 1975: 216). At a cost of 65,000 pesos, the film grossed eighty million pesos, winning international awards and Figueroa's first prize for cinematography at the Venice Film Festival.<sup>viii</sup>

The young cinematographer shot eleven films in the next two years, but it was not until he worked with director Chano Urueta on *La noche de los Mayas* (1939) and *Los de abajo* (1939), that his distinctive approach to cinematographic style began to

develop (Issac, 1993: 27; Figueroa, 1988: 68). He joined Urueta, the actor Arturo de Córdoba, assistant director Miguel Delgado and the sound engineer B.J. Kroger, in a cooperative which transformed into one of the key production companies of the early 1940s, Films Mundiales, headed by manager and producer, Agustín J. Finck (Feder, 1996: 2-14). Following the commercial success of its first film, *Que viene mi marido* (Chano Urueta, 1939), the company launched Julio Bracho's directorial career with *¡Ay, que tiempos, señor don Simon!* (1941). When actors Pedro Armendáriz and Dolores del Río, together with the director, Emilio Fernández, joined the company in 1943 a profitable production ensemble was formed.

Figueroa describes the early period of Films Mundiales as a time when he began to explore '*la mística mexicana*', a concept which developed during meetings of musicians, theatre people, dancers, architects, writers, fine artists and filmmakers at Dolores del Río's Mexico City home (Figueroa, 1988: 74-75). Figueroa describes '*la mística mexicana*' as the creative community's efforts to transform their shared ideas and values into a cohesive Mexican aesthetic. However, he does not elucidate on what constituted the group's notion of Mexican, nor does he detail the content of the group's mutual aims and purpose. Nevertheless, despite its nebulous character, the concept informed his development as a cinematographer.

Whilst he developed his career, Figueroa was also politically active. He played a central role in the rehabilitation of Spanish exiles who had fled to Mexico from Franco's regime, and in 1940, the Republican exiles' committee nominated him as an honorary member. Two years later, he travelled to the Disney studios in Hollywood to represent the Mexican film industry in a seminar on visual education and literacy. The seminar was organised through the US government's Office of the Coordinator of Interamerican Affairs (OCCIA) as part of the wartime good neighbour policy. Despite his controversial presentation on how support for agriculture, health and hygiene would be more helpful in Mexico than a US literacy campaign, Figueroa's participation established him as one of the key figures in Mexico's work with the OCCIA.

In his role as secretary of the technicians' section during the union disputes of 1945, Figueroa played a central part in fundamental changes to the film union that led to the foundation of a new organisation, the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica de la República Mexicana (STPC de la RM).<sup>ix</sup> His commitment to the union movement continued throughout his career and his active campaigning and support for actions such as the Nueva Rosita and Cloete miners' strikes in 1950 against American Smelting and the student demonstrations during the 1950s and late 1960s, resulted in his becoming a well-known and popular figure.<sup>x</sup>

The complex links between the US and Mexican film industries, that became increasingly apparent during the war years, led Figueroa to shoot two major US co-productions in the mid-1940s: *La Perla* (Emilio Fernández, 1945) and *The Fugitive* (John Ford, 1947). *La Perla* was a co-production between RKO Radio Pictures and Aguila Films in Mexico. Location shooting took place near Acapulco and the interiors were shot at the Churubusco studios in Mexico City, where RKO had a 50% holding and a contract to supply equipment and import specialist experts from Hollywood to train the studio's Mexican technicians. John Steinbeck adapted his story of the same title into the screenplay and two versions were made, one in Spanish and the other in English, for the US and international market (Figueroa, 1988: 77).

In 1947, on the recommendation of Toland, Figueroa collaborated with John Ford on *The Fugitive*, an adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *The Power and Glory* (Figueroa, 1988: 108). The director and cinematographer quickly established a close working relationship and Ford gave Figueroa complete cinematographic freedom. On completion of the film, the director signed Figueroa up to a three-picture contract with his production company, Argosy. However, when Figueroa arrived in Hollywood the US entertainment union the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts of the United States (IATSE), led by Richard Walsh, withdrew his US union ticket. This was because in 1946, there had been a disagreement between the IATSE and Figueroa's union during the Hollywood laboratory technicians' strike. The technicians were striking against

the wishes of the IATSE leadership. The US laboratories and union had approached the Mexicans to send personnel to either work in Hollywood or to process the film in Mexican laboratories. The STPC rejected IATSE's request. Walsh had visited Mexico to question Figueroa about the STPC's position and his personal politics and ended the interview with the question, 'Are you a communist?'. Figueroa replied that it was none of his business (Issac, 1993: 38).

Unable to work without a union card, Figueroa could not take up the contract but, as Argosy had already signed him, Ford paid for the three years as agreed.

In 1948, Toland died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Sam Goldwyn offered Toland's job to Figueroa on a fixed five-year, exclusive contract with an option for another five years. Despite Goldwyn's assurances that there would be no problems with visas or work permits, Figueroa declined the offer. His reason was that in Mexico he could retain an artistic freedom that he saw as limited in the Hollywood system. However, in light of the circumstances in which Walsh had blocked Figueroa's US union ticket because of his left-wing activities and given the increasing hysteria of right-wing politicians in the US, Figueroa's refusal of Goldwyn's offer is more indicative of his astute political awareness than his wish to retain artistic integrity. The previous year, the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), led by Senator MacCarthy, had begun its investigations into the political activities of leading figures in US cinema and in the early 1950s, director Elia Kazan, together with screenwriter and director Robert Rossen, gave Figueroa's name to the committee.<sup>xi</sup>

Figueroa's involvement with left-wing union politics and his close associations with members of the Communist and Socialist parties, made him a prime candidate for investigation by HUAC and Federal Bureau of Investigation files on Figueroa indicate that FBI surveillance of him started sometime during this period.<sup>xii</sup>

Moreover, the critical enthusiasm his work received in the Eastern Bloc reinforced the US authorities' view of Figueroa as a politically subversive character, which intensified when, in 1950 he travelled to Karlovy-Vary festival in Czechoslovakia to attend a retrospective of his work and accept an



award. Further, left-wing French critic and writer, Georges Sadoul gave him a public ovation at the opening and as a result introduced Figueroa's work to Western European critics and audiences.<sup>xiii</sup>

1950 was an eventful year for Figueroa in his cinematographic work as he also began his collaboration with Spanish surrealist director, Luis Buñuel on *Los olvidados*. The period marks a transition in Figueroa's work, both in terms of the type of films he accepted and the stylistic direction that he took during the rest of the decade. Figueroa admired the surrealism of Buñuel's work and saw the director as having the necessary flexibility of vision to communicate Mexican reality.<sup>xiv</sup> Furthermore, he also perceived surrealism as a struggle for liberty of expression, 'una lucha por la libertad que no conseguía, como no se consigue por lo general en ninguna parte' (Figueroa, 1988: 214). Although distinct in their political expression, the aim to challenge limitations linked the two filmmakers.<sup>xv</sup> Buñuel aimed to undermine the narrow confines of Western social mores, which he saw as stunting human development and expression and isolating the individual from self-expression and fulfilment.<sup>xvi</sup> Figueroa sought to expand the limits of visual perception. However, whereas Buñuel directed the audience towards the grotesque, Figueroa exposed beauty, whether epic or mundane. The tension in their collaborative work that is a result of the apparent contradiction in their perceptions, nevertheless, produces a coherent and powerful cinematic vision.

In addition to his work with Buñuel during the early 1950s, Figueroa collaborated increasingly with Roberto Gavaldón and, significantly, his thirteen-year association with Fernández ended with *Una cita de amor* in 1956. The previous year, Gavaldón had invited Figueroa to Spain to collaborate on a film starring Jean Gabin and Dolores del Río. Figueroa declined, replying, 'Gracias por la oferta. Para los buenos asuntos y los buenos amigos no tengo condiciones especiales. En caso de filmarse en Madrid iré siempre que quites a Franco del reparto' (Figueroa, 1988: 152). Five years later he refused Buñuel's invitation to collaborate on *Viridiana*, which was also shot in Spain.

Although many of the films Figueroa worked on in the 1950s and 1960s were critically as well as commercially successful, the Mexican film industry slipped into an artistic and economic decline.<sup>xvii</sup> In 1962, Figueroa wrote,

[N]uestro cine, efectivamente, ha bajado de calidad. Quizás porque los productores no pueden hacer inversiones que requiere la mayor calidad. Por reducir costos se hacen películas de baja calidad, y porque son de baja calidad se dificulta la recuperación económica.

(1962: 10)

Indeed, the early 1960s signal a point of departure in Figueroa's career. Although he continued to work with Buñuel, shooting *The Young One* (1960) and *El ángel exterminador* (1962), the Spanish director worked increasingly in Europe. *Simón del desierto* (1965) was his last collaboration with Figueroa and from 1966 onwards Buñuel shot all his films in Spain and France. Like Buñuel, during the early 1960s, Figueroa began to work on international projects and co-productions, although the US continued to deny him a work visa. In 1963, he collaborated with director John Huston on *The Night of the Iguana*, shot entirely in Mexico and which earned him a nomination for an Academy Award, whilst he also continued to work with Gavaldón and Rodríguez, who directed the internationally renowned Japanese actor, Toshiro Mifune, in *Ánimas Trujano*.

Figueroa's union, the STPC, which had functioned on a closed-shop basis since its foundation, organised a competition for experimental film in 1964. The intention was to break the cycle of decline in the quality of films and to open up dialogue for reform and renovation throughout the industry. Although the contest did not produce any major changes in the structure of Mexican production, Figueroa worked on four films by new directors in the mid to late 1960s. The first three were shot in 1965 *Una alma pura* and *Las dos Elenas* (Juan Ibañez) and *Lola de mi vida* (Manuel Barbachano Ponce). The final film, *¿La pax?* (Wolf Rilla), shot in 1967, uncannily anticipated the political turbulence of the following year, both in Mexico and internationally, recorded by Figueroa in his memoirs as the Tlatelolco massacre, the assassination of

Martin Luther King, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR and the repression following the student uprisings in Paris (Figueroa, 1988: 282-283).

Despite Figueroa's contentious relationship with the US authorities and the continued refusal to grant him permission to work, in 1968 the US Academy of Motion Pictures Sciences and Arts elected him as a member. Given the burgeoning production difficulties in Mexico, Figueroa accepted work on two more Hollywood films; *Two Mules for Sister Sarah* (Don Siegel, 1969) and *Kelly's Heroes* (Brian C. Hutton, 1970). Filmed in Morelos, *Two Mules for Sister Sarah* starred Shirley Maclaine and Clint Eastwood and it was on Eastwood's recommendation that MGM offered *Kelly's Heroes* to Figueroa, which he shot in Yugoslavia the following year.

During the 1970s, Figueroa spent increasing amounts of time outside of Mexico, on lecture tours and participating on juries at international film festivals from Argentina to Iran (Figueroa, 2005: 256-257). Significantly, in his memoirs he writes very little about the films he shot during the 1970s. The majority were badly written and produced, and the only films he cites of any importance are *María* (Jorge Issacs, 1971), *La generala* and *Divinas palabras* (Juan Ibañez, 1970 and 1977) and *Cananea* (Marcela Fernández Violante, 1974). Indeed, he symbolises the period 1976-1982, the *sexenio* of José López Portillo, as a black page in his memoirs, on which he writes 'sin comentarios' (1988: 305 & 2005: 261).<sup>xviii</sup>

Throughout the forty years of his career from 1936 to 1976, Figueroa had shot on average five films a year.<sup>xix</sup> However, by the late 1970s he was shooting only two projects a year. In 1983, he worked once again in Mexico with John Huston on *Under the Volcano*. He recalls that there were many technical and personnel problems on the shoot, including camera breakages and freak accidents that destroyed lights. One of Figueroa's assistants was in a car accident, actors were injured on set, Gunther Gerszo, the art director and Angela Dodson, the costume designer were both assaulted and robbed. Figueroa believed the film was jinxed and that the crew and actors were '*embujados*', because six major projects fell through within a year of finishing

*Under the Volcano* (Figueroa, 1988: 312-315). Furthermore, when Huston invited Figueroa, an elected member of the US Academy and an Academy Award nominee, to shoot *Prizzi's Honor* the US authorities again refused him a work permit. Although he never officially retired from the industry, *Under the Volcano*, was Figueroa's last film.

Sixty years after his film début, in 1994, the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) presented Figueroa with the prestigious international award for lifetime achievement. In Hollywood, the one place that had banned his working there for over forty years, the assembled US film elite gave the cinematographer a standing ovation. Three years later, on his ninetieth birthday, newspapers and journals dedicated their lead articles to Figueroa. When, a week later, he died, the celebratory reviews transformed into eulogies.<sup>xx</sup> The obituaries in broadsheets, tabloids and commercial television and radio demonstrate the popular esteem he engendered in the Mexican public and capture a sense of nostalgia for the man and his work. Blanca Ruiz succinctly expresses Figueroa's key role in the creation of a national visual paradigm that is acknowledged in all the obituaries:

Con su muerte se despide no solo uno de los autores más importantes del País, sino una época memorable de México.

(Ruiz, 1997: 23)

But how, then, did Figueroa become an 'author' of Mexico and how and why have his images retained their iconic status over the past sixty years?

### **Figueroa as Icon**

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the nascent Mexican film industry was regarded as a purely commercial enterprise, lacking in either cultural or artistic significance. The state's national cultural programme recognised theatre, music, literature and especially the political value of painting through its sponsorship of the muralist movement, which became the approved visual arbiter of the national image.<sup>xxi</sup> Therefore, when Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco acknowledged and

embraced Figueroa and his work, they established him as an artist, rather than an industrial technician. As a result, Figueroa's personal status and that of Mexico's cinema changed dramatically.<sup>xxii</sup>

Unlike the post-revolutionary Soviet state, during the decade immediately following the violent phase of the revolution (1920-1930), the Mexican government did not consider film as a potential medium for disseminating revolutionary nationalist ideology.<sup>xxiii</sup> Although José Vasconcelos, as Secretary of Education in 1924, had the declared purpose to communicate with and educate the Mexican people, he was suspicious of cinema and perceived the industry as commercial entertainment coming from outside Mexico, from Europe and, worse, the US. Moreover, he was distrustful of the connections between the handful of small commercial production companies in Mexico and its northern neighbour (Joseph and Gilbert, 2002: 15). The government's attitude changed, however, and during the 1930s and throughout the 1940s cinema was to serve as one of the main channels through which the state communicated its message of a progressive Mexico.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In common with many cultural producers before him, the careful construction of a prestigious artistic heritage formed the basis for Figueroa's status as a cultural icon. Paradoxically, for a figure who represents and expresses what he himself termed the '*mística mexicana*', many of the artistic forebears mentioned by writers and, indeed, by the cinematographer himself, are from Europe or the United States (Figueroa, 1988: 74).<sup>xxv</sup> Novelist Carlos Fuentes cites the artists Fragonard, Goya, Géricault and Delacroix as evident influences on Figueroa's work (Fuentes, 1992: 34). Others put forward Rembrandt, Da Vinci and Vermeer to legitimise his creative legacy and celebrity.<sup>xxvi</sup> His major cinematic influences are universally accepted as the now legendary Soviet filmmaking duo Sergei Eisenstein and his director of photography Eduard Tisse and their enigmatic, unfinished film *¡Que Viva México!*, together with German expressionism, US photographer Paul Strand and Figueroa's mentor and friend, US cinematographer Gregg Toland.<sup>xxvii</sup> Critics cite his Mexican influences as the painter Dr Atl (Gerardo Murillo), the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, Leopoldo Méndez of the Taller Gráfica Popular and the composer Carlos

Chávez.<sup>xxviii</sup> However, despite this eminent list of European old masters and Mexican artists, undoubtedly the most significant connections in terms of his iconic status in Mexico were the muralists Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. Figueroa himself acknowledges:

I was the only cinematographer to have such a connection with the muralists. I always found in them what I liked and they saw my pictures, liked them and critiqued them. They said that my films were murals in movement; greater murals, because mine travelled and theirs did not. All these artists inspired us to create a Mexican image for the cinema. Somehow, we found a common basis and I was fortunate enough to see my images accepted all over the world.

(Dey, 1995: 42)

The connection with these artists is noteworthy not simply for the aesthetic interests and political views they shared with Figueroa. What is significant in terms of his iconic status is the common ideological ground that Figueroa inhabited with the *los tres grandes* of the Mexican cultural pantheon and how this functioned in relationship to the state during the 1930s and 1940s. Despite the contradictions that had arisen within the Mexican state's interpretation and manipulation of the ideals of the revolution under the banner of revolutionary nationalism, Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, although holding diverse views and expressions of the left, all held a common belief in the re-distribution of land and wealth, universal suffrage and justice. Each muralist was actively involved in advocating and fighting for workers' rights and their work communicated their commitment to their ideals and aims for the country.<sup>xxix</sup> Such idealists provided good popular icons. Although they were often critical of the state, the state provided a patronage that supported a large portion of their work. Although diverse in their aesthetic and thematic concerns and their stance on social and political issues, the Mexican government held up the muralists' images, and later those of Figueroa, as an exemplary embodiment of *lo mexicano*, an ambiguous, yet central tenet in revolutionary nationalism.

### **Cultural Icons, Transnationalism and Hegemony**

Revolutionary nationalism proposed Mexico as a nation with a strong, independent identity. However, in reality, the Mexican state, culture and the film industry were dependent on systems of financial and political support from the United States. The work of Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco and later Figueroa offered a visual rendering of national identity that functioned as a mask to disguise the deep, transnational links between Mexico and the United States.<sup>xxx</sup> Mexican cinema and culture were not, however, simple conduits of state and US foreign policy. Rather, they promoted an idea of Mexico as an autonomous political, social and cultural entity. In the final analysis, however, *mexicanidad*, an ill-defined term that sanctioned all things Mexican as an embodiment of national spirit, was inherently nationalist in its stance and ultimately justified and supported a Mexican ruling elite whose financial systems and political interests were, paradoxically, embedded in close relations with their fellow elites in the United States. Despite ostensible changes in the economic make-up and political preferences of the ruling classes over the years, Figueroa and the muralists persist as national icons in Mexico. I argue that this is symptomatic of the transnational interests that continue to be deeply rooted within the Mexican elite, and that the superficial nationalist impulses in the images continue to serve a key role in Mexican hegemonic practices.

Alan Knight's lucid discussion of the political elite's handling of Mexico's economics that retained a nationalist, socially inclusive appearance, whilst courting international fiscal partnership, cogently explains how power was kept by controlled consensus rather than overt oppression (1992). Knight's analysis resonates with a Gramscian concept of hegemony which in absorbing dissent, neutralises it to ensure the dominance of the ruling status quo. Whilst never seriously threatening society, culture maintains its expression within the overall socio-economic structure of society which, in turn, dictates the modes and means of expression.

Not all beliefs and aims of individuals and groups are, however, directly determined by economics. Ideologies have relative autonomy from the economic base. Further, the political structure that developed in post-revolutionary Mexico was not homogeneous. It developed and continued to

grow with a fluctuating frame of reference between capitalism and socialism, the extreme right and the extreme left.<sup>xxxii</sup> As I will go on to explore in subsequent chapters, the expression of the dynamic between the poor and the ruling elite, the right and the left and their intimate relation to race is particularly resonant in Figueroa's work.

### **Hegemony and the Imagined Mexico**

What the muralists, Figueroa and their work represent is a connection to a Mexico that never actually existed. It is a Mexico outside of the ebb and flow of socio-economics and politics, yet one that is vivid in the national imaginary. This constant remembrance of things *not* past, is a desire for that imaginary Mexico. It goes beyond the nostalgia that feeds the consumer dreams of contemporary society, it is a belief system that is firmly implanted in the Mexican imagination: even if it did not exist, it is what should have existed, a Mexico to which all should aspire. Figueroa's concept of the '*mística mexicana*', a mystical Mexico that was 'deep' yet artificial, brought into focus the liberal society that ultimately reinforced an arcane and narrow image of Mexico that supported the ideology of revolutionary nationalism (Lomnitz, 2001). Such a worldview conveniently flagged up the complexities inherent in Mexican society established through historical events and political circumstance, but did nothing to suggest an alternative. As a result, it continues to remain convenient for the Mexican ruling elite to grant Figueroa iconic status. In such an ideological project, his socialist beliefs, his political lobbying for workers' rights, his role in the establishment of the major film union, his contentious, complex relationship with the United States, his privileged background, his subsequent rags-to-riches story, his talent and international recognition make him an exemplary figure.

Figueroa's images continue to play a central role as cultural icons in contemporary society just as they did during the 1940s to 1960s. At the beginning of the new millennium, the links between Mexico and the US are closer and the reality of Mexican identity is even more confused and fractured



than before. To present a superficially cohesive memory of a mythic Mexico that 'had it all', despite its proximity to the empire in the North, and to hold up the men and women who were part of its creation as role models for the nation, is an extremely effective and flexible ideological tool. Its adaptability suits the non-iconoclastic nature of Mexico, a culture that is historically syncretic. Rather than destroy icons and idols, the ruling elite has adapted and re-imagined them to maintain their hegemony. The Mexican state and its dominant class, containing families that have held power since colonial times, have used the imaginary Mexico to reaffirm and perpetuate their positions of authority during and after the revolution. Conveniently, and not by coincidence, iconic personalities, despite their rejection and criticism of the state are, more often than not, born and bred within the elite and provide a public yet highly containable 'opposition' to the dominant classes. Such icons provoke, therefore, a manageable rebellion within the ranks, rather than a serious threat from outside.

### **The Classical Paradigm**

Given the iconic position Figueroa holds in Mexico, it might be seen as contradictory to my argument to write a book about Figueroa at all. Despite its critical angle, in the final analysis, surely *any* work on Figueroa merely reinforces the process of mythification to which he has been subject? It might even be judged prudent to write in more general terms about cinematographers in Mexico. Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons why I have chosen to focus on Figueroa.

First, the little critical work on cinematography that exists centres almost exclusively on the United States and Europe and is discussed in terms of what film scholars, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson have defined and promoted as 'Hollywood classical style' (1985).<sup>xxxii</sup> In their deployment of the term classical, the authors establish Hollywood as the progenitor of cinematic style and set the ideal paradigm for cinematic form. At the same time, Bordwell *et al* firmly situate Hollywood as central and dominant. Their placement of the west coast industry at the hub of cinematic style conveniently avoids analysis of US cinema as part of a wider network of

political, cultural and economic contexts. Rather than articulate the US industry as one of many in constant interrelation, the authors bestow universal status on Hollywood. They subjugate its cultural specificity and divert discussion of its product, the films, away from analysis of US cultural, political and economic intervention into countries such as Mexico. With Hollywood at the centre, they place non-US film industries and modes of production firmly on the periphery. Consequently, cinematic style in non-US cinemas is inevitably discussed in terms of these cinemas' outsider positions in relation to the core hub of the classical Hollywood credo.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

It is significant, therefore, that the Hollywood-trained and mentored Figueroa insisted that he looked to achieve a Mexican cinematography (Meyer, 1976: 44-45). It is unlikely that any Hollywood cinematographer would make a claim that he sought to realise a US cinematography. Consequently, it is important to examine Figueroa's work in the light of why he saw this development of a national style as the central motivation to his cinematography, whilst he worked in a distinctly transnational industry and economic context. Indeed, an analysis of Figueroa's career and the images he produced offers a new perspective from which to examine the wider issues surrounding US economic and political intervention in Mexico and how it impacts on film and cultural production more generally.

Second, with the exception of lighting and framing, critics have tended to ignore cinematographic elements in their analysis of the film image. This is not to claim that they have been completely blind to the visual. However, it is important to make a distinction between analysis of the product of cinematography, that is the image we see on the screen and analysis of the image in terms of the cinematographic process and input of the cinematographer. That is to say, we must distinguish between how the physical, technical construction of the image relates to the narrative themes of the film and how the image that is made works as a product of the ideologies that surround a film. A critical consideration of the role of cinematography and the cinematographer can, therefore, engage with the image and its relation to ideology.

Finally, as mentioned above, Gabriel Figueroa holds an exceptional position in Mexican cinema history and an investigation into his work opens up debate on the wider issues of the social, economic and political workings of the Mexican film industry and how Figueroa's images functioned as a visual expression of Mexico in relation to the hegemonic practices of successive governing elites.

*Pulling Focus: New Perspectives on the Work of Gabriel Figueroa*, aims to do what its title suggests, to readjust the emphasis from the anecdotal and biographical to provide a critical appraisal of Figueroa's images, the ways in which they function and their role in contemporary Mexico. This requires a *new* way of looking at cinematography, a fresh focus that encourages alternative perspectives on Figueroa's work that spring from empirical evidence within the images themselves. Such an approach necessitates a navigation between the strong current of national cinema discourse in writing on Mexican films and a transnational standpoint, that acknowledges and critically engages with the presence of the United States, Europe and Hollywood and their impact on the Mexican industry.

This book does not intend to be a definitive study of Figueroa's filmography. The sheer volume of his work precludes in-depth analysis of every film in practical terms alone. Rather, I aim to suggest new critical positions from which to develop future investigation and critical analysis, not only of Figueroa's work, but also the images of other cinematographers, who have been overlooked by film scholarship. With this intention, the book is structured thematically, rather than chronologically, and selects a variety of films from various points in Figueroa's career to illustrate the specific subject area of each chapter.

In Chapter One, after a definition of cinematography and its intricate balance of technology and aesthetic, there is a brief outline of the cinematographer's tools and an exploration of his role in the filmmaking process.<sup>xxxiv</sup> I offer an overview of how critics have discussed the moving image and suggest new

ways of examining images which lay the foundation for my subsequent analysis of Figueroa's work.

Chapter Two deconstructs the prevalent use of the Fernández-Figueroa paradigm that has conflated the work of the director Emilio Fernández with that of Figueroa. I question the assumptions that position the cinematographer's images as part of a national trajectory and unpack the meaning and use of concepts such as *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano*. On close examination of the political and economic contexts of the developing Mexican film industry, it becomes clear that, contrary to what critics have defined as a national cinema, Mexican films were inherently transnational. Figueroa's background and training serves as a good example of how transnationalism informed the development of his cinematography through European and US influences, most importantly via his apprenticeship and friendship with Gregg Toland. Further, using primary sources from the files kept on Figueroa by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) I discuss how highly complex transnational political pressures on the cinematographer circumscribed Figueroa's development and work. In conjunction with other sources, the files lead to a re-evaluation of notions of the national in Mexican cinema and an appreciation of how transnational politics and economics determined its relationship to nationalist ideology and the United States.

Focusing on *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1936) as a case study, in Chapter Three I explore how Figueroa constructs images in relation to music and sound. The film is significant in that it was fundamental in establishing the *comedia ranchera* genre, so central to Mexican film during the following decade. Figueroa's handling of the film's visual language set the benchmark for subsequent films in the genre and the foundation for visualising music in his ensuing work. The chapter also discusses the lack of connection between the study of sound and image in film and suggests a synthesis of critical approaches to enable a more syncretic appreciation of both elements. Moreover, although critics have interpreted *Allá en el Rancho Grande* as a 'reactionary', nationalist text, through examination of the visual language, I argue that the film transcends its reputation to reveal a complex web of

contradictions in nationalist rhetoric and imagery that resulted from the transnational relations so fundamental to the film's production.

Chapter Four focuses on landscape and how Figueroa's work has become synonymous with the visual rendition of Mexican rural space. I investigate how the cinematographer created a visual identity for Mexico whilst, simultaneously, his images expose a paradox in the national imagination that informs the images. With close visual analyses of *Río Escondido* and *Ánimas Trujano* I examine how Figueroa's construction of space and the characters within the landscape communicate the complex social and racial hierarchies inherent in notions of Mexican national identity.

Figueroa's images of the urban space and specifically the capital are examined in Chapter Five. An outline of how Mexico City was not only constructed physically, but also how it was imaged and imagined, is followed by an overview of how the city's image developed to establish the aesthetic and political contexts in which Figueroa represented the urban space cinematographically. Further, and fundamental to my investigation of Figueroa's visual rendition of the city, is an acknowledgment of how notions of modernity, particularly during the mid-twentieth century, when Figueroa was at the peak of his career, affected the images he produced. The drive to modernity, so essential to successive political regimes in the post-war period, not only affected the physical appearance and experience of the city, but also provoked changes in the urban population. The changes radically affected the role of women during the mid-1940s and, from the post-war period onwards, film narratives were increasingly located in urban environments and the main characters in the melodramas and *cabareteras* (an inherently urban genre), that dominated Mexican screens, were women. As a result, Figueroa's images of women in the city space raise issues connected with modernity and that emerged with the disjunctions and contradictions that the burgeoning Mexican urban space provoked. Close analysis of the seminal *cabaretera* film *Salón México* (Fernández, 1948) and the lesser known, but equally significant melodrama, *Días de otoño* (Gavaldón, 1962) shows how the cinematography in

both films positions women in relation to the modern city space to reveal ideological fissures in the key symbol of national identity, motherhood.

In the final chapter, I examine Buñuel's Mexican films, specifically the work produced with his most consistent collaborator, Gabriel Figueroa. I consider notions of exile in relation to the two filmmakers and the hybridity, present in their work together, that accentuates the presence of displacement identified in Buñuel's work. Notions of exile and 'otherness' are explored in the way in which they correspond to the experience and work of Figueroa and Buñuel and I elaborate on the idea of their positions as 'outsiders/insiders' in relation to the social and moral themes conveyed through visual style in *Los olvidados* (1950). An analysis of *El ángel exterminador* (1962) and *Él* (1952) focuses on how Buñuel and Figueroa employ expressionist convention and gothic tradition to develop visual and narrative themes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the two filmmakers developed a visual language that both communicates yet challenges the central themes of each film to provide a subversive insight into the internal workings and demise of the bourgeoisie.

The appendices at the end of the book provide reference points in the following order: (i) Figueroa's complete filmography; (ii) Synopses of the films discussed in the book; (iii) Catalogue of Figueroa's national and international awards; (iv) Glossary of technical terminology.

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<sup>i</sup> The memoirs are edited by Jaime Soler Frost from the autobiographical manuscript from which I have been working over the past seven years and to which I make reference throughout this thesis. The manuscript is a transcript, edited by Figueroa, that was made from taped conversations with his nephew, Juan Antonio Mateos in 1988. The memoirs vary from the original manuscript in that there are syntactical corrections and omissions from the original transcript.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example Issac (1993), Poniatowska (1996), Cakoff (1995). Journal articles include Ramírez Berg (1992 & 1994), White (1982), Feder (1996) and Dey (1995). *Artes de México* published a special issue dedicated to Figueroa in Winter 1988, which was reprinted in Autumn 1992. Television programmes include, *Homenaje a Gabriel Figueroa* (1997) Channel 22, 27 April; *La suerte de vivir, Gabriel Figueroa* (1997) Channel 40, 3 May and on radio *Entrevistas con Gabriel Figueroa* (1997) Radio Educación UNAM, 12 May. Major exhibitions to date include: *Gabriel Figueroa*, Casa-Museo de Diego Rivera, XVIII Festival Internacional

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Cervantino, Guanajuato (1990); *Gabriel Figueroa*, Festival des Trois Continents, Nantes, France (1990); *Gabriel Figueroa*, Valladolid Film Festival, Spain (1992); *Gabriel Figueroa: Veinticinco imágenes en platino*, Galería de Arte Mexicana, Mexico City (1992); *Gabriel Figueroa y la pintura Mexicana*, Museo de Arte Carillo Gil, Mexico City (1996). See Appendix iii for a list of Figueroa's awards.

<sup>iii</sup> At the time of writing, a retrospective of Figueroa stills and equipment is planned for the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City in Autumn 2007. In the UK, a season of his films, together with an exhibition of digital stills, selected and curated by Ceri Higgins, Linda Pariser and Gabriel Figueroa Flores, is scheduled at the Cornerhouse, Manchester in October 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> See for example Charles Ramírez Berg's essays, in which he assumes that Figueroa's work embodied nationalist sentiment and politics. A critique of Ramírez Berg's work follows in Chapter Two.

<sup>v</sup> For example, Elena Poniatowska's book *La mirada que limpia* (1996) juxtaposes interviews between the author and Figueroa, his wife Antonieta, his son Gabriel and his daughters María and Tolita. Poniatowska centres her questions on personal details and the family's subjective views of Figueroa to produce an intimate portrait of the man. Alberto Issac's *Conversaciones con Gabriel Figueroa* (1993) and Farouk Thoyer's article 'La puissance du noir et blanc', concentrate on Figueroa's career and his stories about the films he shot and the people with whom he worked. The dedicated issue of *Artes de México* (1988) is also mainly biographical and includes personal testimonies by Figueroa's friends and colleagues.

<sup>vi</sup> 'Figueroa's Skies and Oblique Perspective, Notes on the Development of the Classical Mexican Style' (1992) and 'The Cinematic Invention of Mexico: The Poetics and Politics of the Fernández-Figueroa Style' (1994).

<sup>vii</sup> Toland's influence on Figueroa is discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>viii</sup> There is a detailed analysis of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* in Chapter Three.

<sup>ix</sup> See Issac (1993: 51-64) for a detailed account by Figueroa of the dispute and establishment of the STPC.

<sup>x</sup> Fidel Velázquez, with whom Figueroa had a confrontation, continued as head of the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) until his death in 1993. As time went on, the STPC introduced restrictive protection practices. This, together with dubious management of the other film and exhibition unions and the perennial problem of investment, provoked and exacerbated the constant crisis of Mexican cinema.

<sup>xi</sup> Figueroa discusses his naming in the HUAC trials by Kazan and Rossen in Issac (1993: 38-40&42-47) and in Poniatowska (1996: 75-77).

<sup>xii</sup> In September 2003, I received copies of extracts from FBI files kept on Figueroa under the Freedom of Information Act. The content of these files is examined in subsequent chapters.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Sadoul's article in *Écran Français* 267, (21), 21 August, 1950, p.6.

<sup>xiv</sup> 'Ese mundo del surrealismo traspasa el mundo de la razón y rompe los patrones lógicos con los que se maneja el mundo real. Lo lógico de gran parte de su cine es lo ilógico, lo

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incoherente del pensamiento de la conducta del hombre. El surrealismo le permite la flexibilidad necesaria de sus imágenes y de la realidad que conocemos en nuestra cultura'. (Figuroa, 1988: 214).

<sup>xv</sup> For a lucid and amusing analysis of Buñuel as a revolutionary artist see Basu (2004).

<sup>xvi</sup> Buñuel's autobiographical writings (1983) demonstrate his constant exploration of limits and boundaries. See also Paul Hammond's excellent introduction to his anthology of Surrealist writing on the cinema (1978) which examines the Surrealist fascination with film and its relationship to reality.

<sup>xvii</sup> For further details of the state of the industry and reasons for its decline during the 1950s and 1960s see de la Vega (1995: 91-93), García Riera (1992e: 7-16) and Mora (1989: 101-110). For an overview of the history and development of the film industry in relation to cultural and political change see Pineda and Paranaguá (1995: 15-62).

<sup>xviii</sup> See Mora (1989: 137-149) and Noble (2005: 21-22) for accounts of the consequences of the López Portillo sexenio for Mexican cinema.

<sup>xix</sup> See Appendix i for details.

<sup>xx</sup> Examples include the edition of *La Jornada* that dedicated a section to Figuroa with eulogies from: Pegueroa, A., Pacheco, C., Monsiváis C., Rodríguez, J.A., Bonfil, C., (1997), *La Jornada*, 24 April, pp. 1-10; Editor (1997) 'Gabriel Figuroa, 90 años del maestro de la mirada', *Reforma*, 24 April, pp. 2-3; Editor (1997), 'Recuerdos de Gabriel Figuroa', *Crónica*, 24 April, pp. 12-13'; García, G., (1997) 'Gabriel Figuroa', *Reforma*, 2 May, p. 2; Pérez Turrent, T., 'In memoriam Gabriel Figuroa (1907-1997)', *Universal*, 2 May p.1.

<sup>xxi</sup> For a succinct analysis of the state's cultural programme in the post-revolutionary period and the use of cinema as propaganda and the distinct roles of fiction and non-fiction films see de los Reyes (1987: 65-94) and de la Vega (1995: 68-78).

<sup>xxii</sup> An exhibition at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Alvar y Carmen T. de Carillo Gil, *Gabriel Figuroa y la Pintura Mexicana*, ran during August and September 1996 and demonstrated the close links between Figuroa and his contemporaries in the fine arts. See the catalogue that accompanied the show edited by Alejandro Beltrán (1996).

<sup>xxiii</sup> In 1919 the Ministry of war produced three documentaries *El block-house de alta luz*, *Honor militar* and *El precio de la gloria* and in 1925 Jorge Stahl produced *La linterna de Diogenes* in support of President Elías Calles. However, film as a mass medium for educational and propaganda purposes was not considered until the mid-1930s.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See Vaughan (2001: 471) for an account of the rise of popular entertainment and the significant role the state played in the post-revolutionary creation of national culture.

<sup>xxv</sup> Figuroa's concept of and use of the term *la mística mexicana* is discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See Levin Rojo (1996: 21), Poniatowska (1996: 40), Issac (1993: 19), Cakoff (1995: 13), Meyer (1976: 46), Dey (1995: 42) and Figuroa (1988: 184-185).



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<sup>xxvii</sup> See Ruy Sánchez (1988: 21) and Ramírez Berg (1992) who make a brief comparative analysis between Eisenstein/Tisse and Figueroa/Fernández and also Levin Rojo (1996), Poniatowska (1996) and Mora (1982: 58).

<sup>xxviii</sup> See for example Levin Rojo (1996: 19-27), Vázquez Mantecón (1996: 35-37), Ruy-Sánchez (1988: 20-21).

<sup>xxix</sup> For further discussion on the muralists and politics see David Craven (2002), Leonard Folgarait (1998), Desmond Rochfort (1993), Bruce Campbell (2003), Anthony W. Lee (1999).

<sup>xxx</sup> Seth Fein gives an exemplary analysis of the transnational links between the US and Mexico during the 'Golden Age' of Mexican cinema. See Fein (1999 & 2001).

<sup>xxxi</sup> See Lomnitz, 2001: 11-12 for an enlightening examination of the dynamic between the franchised and disenfranchised.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985) and Bordwell (1995). Indeed, Bordwell dedicates much of his 1994 essay on deep focus which appears in Staiger's book on the Hollywood studio system, to an examination of cinematographer Gregg Toland's work (Staiger, 1994: 93-124). The essay is exemplary in its meticulous research and argument but, as with his work in the co-authored volume now a core text for film studies students (*The Classical Hollywood Cinema*), the styles attributed to cinematographers, such as Figueroa's mentor, Gregg Toland, are viewed within a carefully constructed paradigm of classicism.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> That many of the key figures in Hollywood who created the 'Classical' style were immigrants to the US is a key paradox and internal contradiction in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's construction.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> I shall use the pronoun 'his' in relation to the cinematographer throughout this thesis. I acknowledge that there are female cinematographers who are important figures in the industry. However, at present, the majority of directors of photography are male and together with the fact that this thesis is on a male cinematographer I have decided for ease of style to use 'his' in preference to the longer 'his/her'.

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## Chapter Two

### Cinematography and Cinematographers

Dialogue is not what makes most of my films interesting, what communicates meaning is the image. The image has to speak forcefully on its own terms.

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(Gabriel Figueroa, 1996)<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Cinematography is a creative and interpretive process which culminates in the authorship of an original work rather than the simple recording of a physical event. The images which the cinematographer brings to the screen come from the artistic vision, imagination and skill of the cinematographer working within a collaborative relationship with fellow artists.

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(American Society of Cinematographers)<sup>xxxiv</sup>

With light, movement and composition, cinematography projects atmosphere, emotion, gesture and words onto a screen, in a play between image and the written word. Italian cinematographer, Vittorio Storaro defines his work as, 'Cin=movement, photo=light, graphy=writing. Cinematography is writing with light in movement' (Greenhalgh, 2003: 98). In short, it is the visual expression of the themes and content of the script. This central creative process is the work of the cinematographer who, in collaboration with the director, creates meaning through the subtle relationship of image and story.

The director-cinematographer relationship is crucial to the effectiveness of a film and therefore, when a director and cinematographer find they work together well they collaborate as much as possible. Figueroa worked consistently with Emilio Fernández, Luis Buñuel and Fernando de Fuentes. Directors Ingmar Bergman and Bernardo Bertolucci collaborated on the majority of their films with Sven Nikquist and Vittorio Storaro respectively, and the David Lean-Freddie Young and the Alfonso Cuarón-Emanuel Lubezski

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partnerships demonstrate some of the most consequential director-cinematographer relationships in the medium.

In order to express the ideas and substance of the script effectively, cinematographers use a range of tools that are central to their craft. The choice and application of this apparatus, or 'gear', is important to the successful communication of the director's vision. Despite recent developments in digital technologies that have multiplied the tools available to filmmakers and expanded visual and narrative possibilities, the fundamental elements of perspective, composition, light, shadow and colour, that create meaning in the image, remain the same. Briefly, these include: lenses that govern perspective, depth of field and angle of view; lights that define depth, atmosphere, colour and mood; filters to define diffusion, exposure (neutral density filters), focus (diopters and split diopters), colour balance, contrast and texture of the image; and finally, film stock and the subsequent laboratory processes that affect the grain, texture, contrast and saturation of the image. All of these elements are fundamental to the creation of meaning in a film.

Significantly, with the notable exceptions of lighting and composition, these central facets have been ignored in film analysis. Indeed, in the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a subtle shift away from engagement with the image towards an increasing use of theoretical models from a range of diverse academic disciplines. Together with the growing engagement with film by scholars in disciplines outside of traditional film studies, there was a change of direction and emphasis in discussions about film. The widening discourse on cinema resulted in a further shift of focus away from the essential visual nature and construction of film to a myriad of readings and interpretations. In short, over the past thirty years, the tendency has been for films to be looked *into* rather than looked *at* and the image literally overlooked in favour of what happens in it (Sobchack, 1979: 596-597). Figueroa's words in the epigraph not only point to the importance of the image, but also hint at the bias critics have had towards characterisation, structure and theme in relation to narrative and

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the way in which film theory moved away from close visual analysis during the 1980s and 1990s in favour of other critical frameworks.

Taking Figueroa's cue I shall address this issue of looking *at* rather than looking *into* film images before discussing the specifics of his work. In order to look *at* images, it is useful to define the fundamentals of cinematography. What follows, therefore, is a brief summary of the tools and techniques available to the director of photography and his production role.

### **The Lens and Perspective**

The camera is like the one-eyed man. It has no direct means of suggesting depth but only referential means like perspective and parallax movement. Unlike the eye, the camera lens has a fixed and narrow frame of vision. Unlike the eye, it often sees on a surface that is unresponsive to colour. Nevertheless, it is through the needle's eye of the camera that the director must funnel the impressions that he wants to convey.

(Spottiswoode, 1966: 40)

The main component of the camera is the lens. The choice of lens defines the angle of vision: the wider the angle of the lens, the wider the possible field. It is the eye of the director. However, even the widest angle lens does not have the angle of vision that the human eye has. The eye has a 120° field of vision, which tapers off at the edges. A wide-angle lens, on the other hand, has only a 50° field, which cuts off sharply at the periphery of view. Moreover, the adjustment the brain makes to change our field of vision when we turn our head, does not happen on film. A mobile, wide-angle lens cannot compensate for the change in distance and angle and, therefore, on a wide lens, camera movements distort perspective, making lines that are parallel when static appear curved. In 35mm film (the format on which Figueroa worked, with the exception of some experimental films during the 1960s when he worked with a 16mm camera) the lens that approximates the spatial perception of the human

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eye is the 50mm. Significantly, Figueroa's preferred lenses were the wide-angle 24mm and 28mm, that were well outside of the 'normal' range (Figueroa Flores, 2002). His consistent use of wide-angle lenses was the basis of his cinematic signature style. Both lenses work outside of the rules of conventional perspective and Figueroa consciously developed a curvilinear perspective in his work that played alongside his use of rectilinear perspective. He described this process in an interview with Elena Feder:

The principle of rectilinear perspective is to guide the gaze to a particular point centered in the frame. Curvilinear perspective, on the other hand, works to split the eye between two distinct perspectival points of entry, joined by means of lines travelling along a curved plane within the frame. This increases the illusion of depth. In addition, the technical development of wide-angle lenses made it possible to add even more depth and content to a particular frame or scene.

(Feder, 1996: 8)

His inspiration for the application of curvilinear perspective was the work of Mexican painter Dr Atl (Gerardo Murillo), the experiments of his mentor cinematographer, Gregg Toland and the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (Feder, 1996: 8). Although in 1934, Atl wrote that curvilinear perspective was 'antifotográfica' and that the standard camera lens as 'una parodia del ojo humano' could never present on screen the perspectives an artist could achieve on canvas, wide-angle motion picture lenses were already available and cinematographers such as James Wong Howe were already experimenting with the different perspective the wide-angle allowed (Atl, 1934: 101). However, it was not until Figueroa, following the lead of Toland, began to experiment with 24mm and 28mm lenses and perspective (made more viable with the introduction of lens coatings during the 1940s), that Atl's aim of a new interpretation of nature was seen in Mexican film.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Figueroa said that his images worked 'like a gothic cathedral' through the emphasis of vertical and diagonal dramatic composition in relation to

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curvilinear perspective (Greenhalgh, 2003: 105). Indeed, the wide-angle lens, in conjunction with appropriate lighting creates a gothic atmosphere and Figueroa's use of this combination of light and lens is especially apparent in his collaboration with Buñuel and its relation to German expressionist film.

Besides focal length, the other characteristic of a lens is its relative aperture, that is, the amount of light that enters the lens. The combination of the focal length and the aperture determines the 'speed' of the lens, that is, the amount of light needed for its optimum use. As a rule, a 'fast' lens requires less light than a 'slow' lens. In short, the lens determines the perspective and framing of what is in front of the camera.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The main advantage of the wide lenses that Figueroa used is that, at a given distance and f/stop, they provide greater depth of field. This means that figures and objects from the foreground to the background of frame are equally in focus. Combined with composition in depth, distance is exaggerated and allows for multiple action within the frame. Figueroa's use of compositional depth, with its diverse points of focus and distance was innovative and is central to my discussion of his films.

Further, the lens in relation to camera position defines the frame. Unlike painting (which is often referred to as analogous to the film image) or indeed photography, the film frame constantly changes:

It is not a passive container; it is an active signifier. Because the views within the frame are perpetually changing, perpetually shifting, the frame's organization of those views is perpetually in the process of making new significations.

(Mast, 1984: 85)

Whether it is the action of characters, in and outside, entering and leaving the frame or the movement of the camera, with a pan, track, crane or dolly, the film frame transforms itself. Movement always has a purpose; whether to reveal something (about a character or place) to the audience, to motivate action or to add another layer of meaning to the narrative. It is the responsibility of the cinematographer that this constant change remains

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consistent to the atmosphere and meaning of the film. On close examination of his work, it is apparent that Figueroa is economic with camera movement. He uses pans, tracks and tilts only when they are essential to the meaning of a scene or to increase the narrative pace and conversely, he constructs scenes on static camera if it is appropriate to the overall theme of the film. For example, whereas *Salón México* (Emilio Fernández, 1948) is full of sensual tracks and slow pans across the dancers in the dancehall and the movements of the main characters, *The Fugitive* (John Ford, 1947) reflects the rigidity of the governing regime and the impasse with spirituality in long, static takes, filled with chiaroscuro lighting.

## Lighting

Light is to space, what music is to sound.

Adolphe Appia (Sears, 2003: 101)

Light and shadow guide our perception of space and are 'the most important, subtle and powerful tools of visual storytelling' (Brown, 2002: 166).

Lighting has developed hand in hand with changes in lenses and film stocks and the overall development throughout the twentieth century was towards 'fast' lenses and 'fast' film stocks that needed less light. The cinematographer's choice of lens and stock affects his choice and use of light and is intricately connected with the atmosphere and meaning of the scene and of the film as a whole. Lighting technology changed over the course of Figueroa's career but essentially developed from six basic categories: HMIs; tungsten fresnels; tungsten open face lights; fluorescent; xenons and practicals (seen on set), each with its own specific properties.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

There is also, of course, natural light and, certainly, Figueroa used available light whenever possible. This was for economic and practical considerations as well as aesthetic reasons, as to light a studio set had very different criteria and costs than to set up lights or indeed, to use available light on location. For example, the location shots of *Los olvidados* (Buñuel, 1950), were taken in the

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middle of the day. Figueroa chose to shoot during the period of most intense sunlight to produce a flat, shadowless image, representative of the desolate physical and emotional environment of the film, whilst the interior scenes, shot in the studio, reflect the darker themes of the film with low lighting and contrasty images.<sup>xxxiv</sup> For *La perla* (Emilio Fernández, 1945), Figueroa elected to shoot the opening exterior scenes on a wide lens at dawn when the early morning sun created long shadows from the static villagers on the beach. The shots communicate the community's tense wait for a change in the sea conditions and their vulnerability in relation to the ocean. Conversely, in the interior scenes of the hut, he uses a shorter lens and the lighting is diffuse, with little shadow, to capture the harmony of the main characters' home. Figueroa constantly experimented with the use of light in this way, correlating his choices of lens, film stock and filters as much in line with budgetary constraints as for aesthetic reasons, yet in this delicate balance between economics and aesthetic he never compromised the integrity of the image (Figueroa Flores, 2001).

### **Filters**

As Figueroa worked mainly in black and white, he used filters almost exclusively for diffusion and contrast control. Diffusion filters 'soften' the image and reduce contrast. Figueroa, however, often preferred to use thin, delicate textiles, such as silk stockings or linen gauze over the lens, particularly when he shot close-ups of female stars. His son remembers that his father would frequent textile shops to see if there were new materials, silks, nets or voiles, that would serve as a diffuser (Figueroa Flores, 2003).

On the other hand, contrast filters essentially 'sharpen' the image. They work to lighten or darken the monochromatic rendering of certain colours in the subject. This introduces a difference in brightness between two colours which would otherwise reproduce in black and white as similar tones of grey. A coloured object will appear dark in a print if photographed through a filter which absorbs the colour of the light reflected from or transmitted through the object.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Figueroa worked with art directors to find the most appropriate



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colours in the sets and with make-up artists to find the best foundation and lip colours on the actors in order to improve the range of contrast. One of the most extreme examples was *Río Escondido* (Emilio Fernández, 1949), his most radical experiment with filters, where María Félix's lips were coloured brown and her face covered in heavy white pancake.

Filters eliminate unseen atmospheric haze and render a sharper image. They also decrease the amount of light entering the lens and therefore it is vital that the cinematographer calculate the amount of light falling onto the film in order to find the appropriate exposure. Indeed, some of Figueroa's most inventive cinematography is evident in his work with filters.

### **Film Stock**

Film stock is the name given to the negative celluloid on which a film is shot. Figueroa's best-known images are in black and white and he was clear about his preference for it above colour. Black and white had for him 'una fuerza expresiva, una calidad onírica que la contundencia, el realismo del color, anula' (Issac, 1993: 71).

It was the introduction of Eastman Kodak Plus X in 1938, that had a decisive impact on the development of Figueroa's cinematography. Plus X gave the image definition of the earlier, slower stocks and it quickly became the most favoured stock in Hollywood during the 1940s as it required less light in the studio and therefore dramatically cut the budget of films (Salt, 1992: 196). It had the added advantage that it allowed the option for the cinematographer to work on a smaller aperture to produce greater depth of field. This was an important factor in how Figueroa was able to develop his signature wide-angle, deep focus style and to aid his experiments in perspective. Although during the 1940s an increasing range of film stocks became available, they were mainly in colour. The only new black and white stock that appeared during the decade was the Dupont Superior II and III. Figueroa, like Toland, continued to shoot on Eastman Kodak Plus X and Super XX.

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However, it is important to note that Figueroa did not have much say in his choice of film stock. With the advent of World War II in 1939, there was an embargo on stock from the German Agfa and it would have been very difficult to obtain French stocks like Dupont. Further, Figueroa was pivotal in securing an agreement with Kodak, organised by Nelson Rockefeller at the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCCIA), to supply raw film stock to Mexico (Figueroa 1988: 132). During the 1950s, Kodak produced Tri-X, a film which had greater latitude and could be used with even less light. However, Super XX continued to be the preferred stock of most feature cinematographers, including Figueroa and his colleagues. Assisted by the deal made with Figueroa during the war, Kodak dominated the Mexican market for the next three decades (Salt, 1992: 241).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### **Laboratory Techniques**

It is in the laboratory that the latent image on an exposed film turns into a visible image through the processing and development of the negative on which the film has been shot, and where decisions on the final look of the film in terms of contrast, resolution, exposure and colour are made. Figueroa had a close relationship with laboratories and the technicians who worked with his footage and together they carried out rigorous light tests to find the optimum light at which to develop the negative.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

An example of how he experimented with processing and the good relationships he maintained with technicians, is apparent in an interview with Alberto Issac in which he describes a film he shot in Patagonia with Fernández, *La Tierra del Fuego se apaga* (1954):

El sol colgado a 45 grados. Había mucho viento y las nubes corrían a gran velocidad, dando una sombra cambiante que resultaba muy plástica, muy interesante. En ese momento establecí mi estrategia para la fotografía. Hice una transportación de gamas. La gama para el blanco y negro, en todo el mundo, era de 6.5. Yo hice una prueba de 400 pies de película y la envié al laboratorio en Buenos Aires, donde ya

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había hecho algunos ensayos y ya tenía amigos. Las instrucciones: 'Busquen gama 9.5 o 10 porque no tengo otra' [...] A los tres días recibí uno de los mensajes más satisfactorios de mi vida profesional: 'Gama 9.5 exacta. El suyo es el material de más calidad que ha pasado por este laboratorio.' Era la luz ideal.

(Issac, 1993: 112)

The gamma is the relationship between the overall contrast of the film and the variation in contrast between the original subject matter and the image reproduced. The change in the gamma ratio during processing enabled Figueroa to retain the blacks in the image whilst also obtaining a wide range of greys through to white. His attention to contrast through the manipulation in the laboratory, together with his use of filters, contributed to his films ranging from luminous gradations of a full range of black through greys to white, to high contrast black and white.

### **The Director of Photography**

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Yo soy un artista, no soy un técnico, pero conozco la técnica suficientemente para poder desarrollar mi trabajo.

(Gabriel Figueroa, 1997)<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The cinematographer is also called the 'Director of Photography' (DoP/DP) or 'Lighting Cameraman/Camerawoman' in Britain, 'Chef Opérateur'/'Directeur de la Photographie' in France and 'Operator' in Eastern Europe, terms that have arisen from their specific industrial, cultural and historical contexts.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Figueroa always had a separate credit under *fotografía*. In the majority of films, his credit came immediately before the director's, and foregrounded him as central to the production process.

The cinematographer's relationship with the director is one of the central collaborations of the filmmaking process. Actual working practices

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vary enormously across different productions. Figueroa was, nevertheless, clear on how he saw the role of a cinematographer, 'Hay que plegarse a la idea del director al cien por ciento' (Meyer, 1976: 50). However, he also emphasised that the relationship was very much in a spirit of mutual collaboration, stating that 'el cine es un arte de conjunto' (Meyer, 1976: 48). With this attitude, he developed different working practices with each of the directors with whom he collaborated. For example, with Fernández, one of the key directors of the so-called 'Golden Age' and with whom he collaborated most, he was in complete control of the lighting, camera placement and movement (Issac, 1993: 31; Thoyer, 2000: 98; Poniatowska, 1996: 49-50). With the surrealist, émigré Buñuel, notorious for his lack of concern for photography, he concentrated on lighting, creating the atmosphere and mood of the films and perspective in the frame (Thoyer, 2000: 99; Meyer, 1976: 48). On the other hand, the internationally renowned US director Ford, like Fernández, gave Figueroa full control over the camera placement, movement and lighting (Meyer, 1976: 50; Thoyer, 2000: 98; Figueroa, 1988: 38-40).

Figueroa's filmography demonstrates a wide range of work with production values that vary from film to film and director to director. A large proportion of his filmography is made up of work on *churros*, quick turnaround films, many of which are comedies and which, despite being technically adequate, are not usually referred to in the same way as the more 'serious' films, which have become his trademark. What is more, it is important to bear in mind that Figueroa worked in a commercial industry that did not have the concept of 'art house' film we have today. The trajectory of the film industry throughout the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and into the 1960s was an emphatically commercial enterprise. It was not until the late 1960s that Figueroa worked on more experimental productions, with the younger filmmakers of the *Nuevo Cine* group, which might now fit into the category of independent film.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The finances of a production obviously affect the modes of working and equipment available to a cinematographer. However, a surprisingly small minority of productions in Figueroa's filmography would be

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categorised as big budget. He worked with relatively little need for expensive equipment, large lighting rigs or effects. What we see on the screen he achieved through simple techniques with the aim of creating an appropriate visual style for each narrative and of being the eye that channelled the director's vision.

It is clear, therefore, that the cinematographer plays a key role in the creative construction of a film. Yet, there is an apparent disregard for the work of the director of photography in both mainstream criticism and academic film studies. What were the reasons for the shift in criticism and scholarship from looking *at* the films to looking *into* them? A brief overview of how discussion of the image has evolved over the past fifty years reveals the subtle way in which the emphasis shifted, relatively early on in cinema studies, from the image to the narrative of film and to push the picture to the background.

### **The Focus on Cinematography**

In the exemplary *Making Pictures: A Century of European Cinematography*, the president of the European Confederation of Cinematographers (1992-1994), Luciano Tovoli, suggests that although recognition for cinematographers has been growing in recent years, their work is still described in generalities, rather than examined and discussed in meaningful terms (Sears, 2003: 7). As Vittorio Storaro comments in *American Cinematographer*, '[Critics] assume technology removes emotion, spirit, intelligence. If they wrote in an informed manner they could help us improve. Our best efforts are trivialised by ignorant evaluations, like "great scenery"' (Greenhalgh, 2003: 106). Both Tovoli and Storaro highlight the lack of critical engagement with cinematography by critics who have tended to concentrate on biographical details and anecdotes provided by cinematographers, rather than address the images and the processes that created them. One of the few writers who does engage critically with cinematography, and who has provided an important perspective from which I have formulated my own approach to the subject, is film scholar Cathy Greenhalgh. She acknowledges that, 'We have

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little idea how these moving images were materialised and the contributions of those who made them. The cinematographer is a key player in all this and yet his or her ideas and working processes still appear very mysterious' (Greenhalgh, 2003: 95). She goes on to suggest why critics fail to acknowledge and analyse the work of cinematographers:

What critics are unable to acknowledge, and therefore collude with, is the structure of a market and critique which keeps cinematographers from achieving proper recognition. In some countries a system of fees has been in operation. 'Above the Line' employees – the director, the producer, the artistes – can negotiate fees and percentages. Producers have succeeded in keeping cinematographers – as well as other key creative personnel and all crew – 'below the line'. This keeps those judged to be technicians, however highly regarded, in their place.

It is easy to see why cinematographers are reluctant to risk speaking about what may be perceived as the director's aesthetic territory, when their next job may be on the line.

(Greenhalgh, 2003: 146)

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Certainly, in the contexts of Hollywood and the European film industries this may be the case. But why has the system of 'above the line' and 'below the line' evolved and what purpose does it serve? I would suggest that the division in production terms originates in the perceived relationship between a profit-making industry and the creative process, a relationship that is seen as a conflict between financial gain and artistic expression. Cinematographers, categorised as technicians and therefore 'below the line', have tended to be ignored within film criticism which has placed the centre of critical attention on the more evident 'above line' creative team of director, actors and producers.

One aspect of film theory that addresses the art/industry dichotomy is auteur theory. The fact that David Gerstner and Janet Staiger (2003) agreed to write individual introductions to their valuable anthology *Authorship and Film*, acknowledges the complex and contentious developments of the theory and the

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multiple critical approaches it has inspired. Yet, despite the detailed overview of notions of authorship covered by the various contributors to the book, a critical examination of the collaborative nature and workings of the production process is evaded, except in consideration of 'grassroots', i.e.: non-commercial, collective filmmaking practices. Therefore, although auteur theory questions the relationship of art and industry, in its assertion that specific directors could express themselves artistically within the industrial constraints of the film industry, be it Hollywood or non-US, it persists in its exclusive focus on the director, an 'above line' figure, as auteur. Finally, in proposing only a select number of directors within an industrial framework, auteur theory paradoxically reinforces the belief that the creation of art within a commercial infrastructure is, with few exceptions, untenable.

Edward Buscombe suggests that the distinction between 'above' and 'below' line roles has its roots in dominant social ideas around the relationship of art to industry:

One might suppose that a little common sense would tell us that such a distinction is nonsense, that all film is both industry *and* art, in some sense. Yet, the proof that the mutual exclusion of art and industry operates at a level too deep to be affected by mere common sense can be found not only in the dominant critical attitudes but in the organisation of social institutions.

(Buscombe, 1995: 18)

He goes on to highlight that one of the main consequences of this split has been that film criticism has produced a rigid dichotomy between films and the processes that produce them. This has resulted in a tendency for film studies to concentrate on film content. Political, social and cultural contexts may be central to their analysis, but ultimately films are read as texts, representations of a society, with no consideration of how economic, technological and industrial practices contribute to and create meaning within the film. In other words, they are looked *into* rather than *at*.

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Cinematography has a particularly ambiguous position in this widely accepted division. On one hand, it is a technical area, 'below the line' whilst, on the other hand, a cinematographer is central in creating the very images which are the fundamental basis of film criticism and analysis. An in-depth analysis of cinematography, therefore, suggests ways in which to reconcile this dichotomy and propose a more pragmatic position that avoids the perpetuation of the industry/art, technical/aesthetic divide.

Mike Cormack notes that discussion of film style falls into two groups, 'explanations based on individual creativity and explanations based on technological change' (1994: 1). In the first category, there are the explanations based on individual creativity, that is, anecdotal accounts of the work and life of specific cinematographers with little reference to the specifics of the images they produced. In the second are detailed technical studies on the development of cinematographic equipment.

However, I would suggest a third category for Cormack's model to include a small body of work which investigates the wider contexts and implications of image and technology and relates the development of cinematic style to economic and ideological forces. Indeed, Cormack's own study falls into this group.

In his first category, Cormack cites as examples, Charles Higham's 1970 book *Hollywood Cameramen* and Leonard Maltin's *The Art of the Cinematographer* (1971), which discuss the individual creativity of selected cinematographers. More recent examples of this type include *Cinematographers on the Art and Craft of Cinematography* (Anna Sterling, 1987), and *Contemporary Cinematographers on their Art* (Pauline Rogers, 1998). Although published nearly twenty years after Higham and Maltin, Sterling and Rogers employ the same concept and structure in their critique. Both publications are compilations of transcribed and edited interviews made up of personal anecdotes or explanations of how the featured cinematographer achieved a look or effect in a particular film. Poniatowska's *Una mirada que*



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*limpia* (1996) and Issac's *Conversaciones con Gabriel Figueroa* (1993) would fit into this category, although with considerably more emphasis on the anecdotal and biographical than on technical detail. Jack Cardiff's autobiographical *Magic Hour* (1996) also falls into this group, together with other publications authored by cinematographers, these include *Every Frame a Rembrandt* (Lazlo, 2000), and Nestor Almendros's classic text, *Man with a Camera* (1985).

Cormack's second category includes studies in which technological innovation and subsequent stylistic change are seen as part of an inevitable path of scientific progress and, therefore, are unrelated to the society in which they develop. *American Cinematographer*, the house journal of the American Society of Cinematographers, would be a good candidate for this category. Reports on lenses, stock and, throughout the last fifteen years, the developments in digital technologies are combined with interviews and reviews of practising cinematographers and how they have incorporated these technological advances into their work. Barry Salt's books (1992 & 1976) extend *American Cinematographer's* remit and concentrate on providing detailed information on the development of lenses, stock and lighting. Salt proposes that this is the most appropriate approach to cinematography. He believes that technological developments are completely autonomous from their wider context and, 'as for ideology, its connection to film technology is practically zero' (Salt, 1976: 123).

Salt's comment highlights the dearth of critical thinking in relation to cinematographic practice and its development within a wider frame of reference. It relates to the work of the authors mentioned in the first category who construct their studies on the individual cinematographer and their development of a particular mode of working and style on an accepted assumption that the technology used is scientific and, therefore, ideologically neutral. As a result, these writers also place the creative process of the cinematographer outside of ideology, as if somehow they were immune to the political, economic and social context that surrounds them.

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Although André Bazin (1967) and Patrick Ogle (1971) suggest a more complex view of technological progress, both critics see the principal motivation behind technical innovation in cinematography as an impulse towards greater realism.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As ideology defines notions of realism, (a fundamental point which neither Bazin nor Ogle acknowledges) their approach is ultimately in line with Salt. The more recent work of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985) in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, and Duncan Petrie's study of British cinematographers (1994) (which adopts their model of analysis) continue to avoid questions about why and when technological advances are made available and, most importantly, how cinematographers use them in their particular industrial and personal contexts.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Consequently, there is no analysis of the ways in which ideology informs the development of film technology and the work of the cinematographer. It is as if the technical and creative processes that construct the screen image operate within an ideological vacuum and as such bear no relation to the cultural, political and economic contexts that inform those processes.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

To be sure, the discussion of specific technical data and personal experience within these texts is an invaluable record of the craft and constant innovation of cinematography. As with anecdotal accounts of Figueroa's career and his autobiographical writings, they provide useful material on the way in which a cinematographer deals with particular challenges in his work. However, placing these details within wider ideological contexts deepens understanding of cinematography and transcends the inevitable mystification of the role of the cinematographer and the technology with which they work. Further, it opens up issues that surround the motives and impulses for innovation, how new technology is developed, by whom and to what ends and thereby avoids vague notions of natural development, practicality and individual creativity.

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### **Ideology, Technology and Cinematography Interpreted**

Despite the ground-breaking work of theoreticians such as Brian Henderson, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean Louis Comolli and Bill Nichols, who during the 1970s began to explore technology and cinematic style within ideological frameworks, the area remains relatively unexplored. This may be due to the concentration in film studies on the film text and the burgeoning dominance of psychoanalytical and cultural analysis during the 1980s. Comolli succinctly summarises the dominant view his contemporaries held on cinema, which could still apply today:<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Everything involved in the field of film technology – equipment, methods, standards, conventions – is vigorously defended from any ideological implications by a number of critics, filmmakers, and naturally, by the majority of technicians themselves. They'll agree (more or less) that film has a relationship to ideology on the level of themes, production (system of economic relations), distribution (interpretations) and even on the level of its realization (by the *metteur-en-scène*/subject) but never any in the area of the technical practices which *manufacture* film from beginning to end. They demand a place apart for film technology, beyond ideologies, outside history, social movements and the construction of meanings. Film technique we are told is precisely that – a technique and neutral.

(Comolli, 1977: 128)

It is Comolli who points out the assumption that technology is neutral. Taking J.P. Lebel's work, *Cinema and Ideology*, as a starting point, Comolli emphasises that the development of technology is grounded in ideology. He stresses that, for example, the camera was produced on the assumption of the Quattrocento code of perspective exactly at a time when late nineteenth-century artists were beginning to question their relationship to this code. Yet, because the camera was 'scientifically' produced, the aesthetic and technical codes that governed its development were consequently seen as ideologically and aesthetically neutral.

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Significantly, Comolli highlights the importance of not confining technical issues to the 'visible part of film technique (camera, shooting, crew, lights, screen)' to the exclusion of the 'invisible part (frame lines, chemistry, fixing and developing, baths and laboratory processing, negative, the cuts and joins of montage technique, soundtrack, projector etc...)'.

He continues:

It is not clear, therefore, that what is happening at the moment on the level of practice should be reproduced on the level of theory: the reduction of the hidden part of the technique to its visible part carries the risk of reasserting the domination of the visible i.e.: *the ideology of the visible* (and what it implies, the masking and effacement of work).

(Comolli, 1977: 131)

Comolli's cry for a reassertion (but not dominance) of the visual in film theory and criticism is echoed in Henderson's notable essay 'Towards a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style' in which he examines camera style in Godard's film *Weekend* (1976). Henderson proposes that Godard's stylistic choices had intrinsic ideological consequences. He suggests that the decision to 'flatten' the image in *Weekend* was a conscious rejection of what he describes as 'bourgeois world-view and self image' projected by composition in depth. Further, in his footnotes he proposes that composition in depth has an innate 'inexhaustible mystery'. Using Welles as an example, he suggests that the multiple viewpoints and perspectives in films such as *Citizen Kane* 'fail to yield certainty concerning the underlying questions'. Although I would question Henderson's assertion that deep focus is inherently bourgeois, his work is seminal as it is one of the few ideological readings of cinematography.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Paradoxically, however, Henderson, in common with other critics and theorists of the period, continues to develop his theory in auteurist terms. Not once in his article is Godard's cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, mentioned nor, indeed, Welles's director of photography, Gregg Toland, nor is consideration given to their roles in the decision-making process. Although his

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auteurist assumptions limit Henderson's work as a complete paradigm, it is, nevertheless, a valuable reference point from which to embark upon a critical study of the work of a cinematographer and the function of cinematography in the creation of meaning in a film.

In a more general extension of Henderson's approach, Bill Nichols gives an astute appraisal of how images serve ideology:

Representations must be made to appear to be other than what they are. Above all, they must appear to lack these very contradictions that informed their production. They must appear as signs of eternal values: harmony, wholeness, radiance, a natural and ideal world spun from the representations of an existing social order.

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(Nichols,  
1981: 290)

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Nichols's words resonate with the iconic status Figueroa and his images hold and suggest that on closer examination, their perceived luminosity, balance and perfection actually reveals fissures within the film text, the very contradictions that Nichols suggests are hidden beneath the surface of every image.

### **Conclusion**

Given the above evidence of how central a cinematographer's contribution is to a production, it is remarkable that their work is overlooked in mainstream culture and in film scholarship. Greenhalgh writes an unprecedented account of the lack of attention directed to cinematographers and I shall draw some of the points from her essay, together with my own observations, to briefly summarise the reasons as to why this situation has come about (Greenhalgh, 2003: 155).

The very nature of the director-cinematographer collaboration can confuse what critics and theorists interpret as the director's and

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cinematographer's respective input to a film, a confusion that is augmented by the number of names used to describe a cinematographer. Although cinematographers often have larger filmographies than directors (compare, for example, Figueroa's 224 films to Fernández's 38 films), they are only usually given artistic recognition in conjunction with a particular director which, combined with the pervasiveness of auteur theory, has merely compounded the lack of acknowledgement of cinematography.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Moreover, the tendency for scholars to look *into* films rather than *at* them has consequently led to a lack of engagement with the construction of the image and in the film industry, cinematographers as 'below line' technicians are frequently not adequately credited for their artistic input. Further, that critics and scholars rarely understand the real practice of filmmaking results in limited critical approaches to film and the few cinematographers who have written about their work in detail err towards the anecdotal rather than a critical discussion of the more technical and creative aspects of their work. Finally, the ubiquitous dominance of Hollywood in film studies, which has seriously limited a full appraisal of international cinematographic practices, is supported by the lack of distribution for non-Hollywood films which are rarely seen outside of festivals or in short runs at art house cinemas. Therefore, many critics and scholars are simply not aware that there may be cinematic practices that have developed and continue to flourish outside of the narrow limitations of the US industrial model.

The aim in the chapters that follow is to reposition Figueroa as a giver of meaning within the filmmaking process. The objective is not to position the cinematographer, in this case Figueroa, as an alternative auteur, but rather to acknowledge the collaborative nature of film production, in particular the relationship between the cinematographer, the director and the production of the film text. Further, my intention is to bridge the gap that has occurred between writing on film and looking at it, in order to reposition the image as central to film scholarship and criticism. My approach requires an acknowledgement of Figueroa within specific industrial, political and cultural histories and of how his role as cinematographer functioned in relation to film production and to society. As mentioned in the introduction, analysis of

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Gabriel Figueroa is complicated, as to merely deconstruct his status would, paradoxically, only add to the myth that already exists. Therefore, this book analyses the construction of the images he produced and negotiates the mythology that has come to surround the cinematographer and his work, to expose the rifts and fissures within the ideological construction and use of both the images that became so fundamental to the national imaginary of Mexico and the man who created them.

The following chapter addresses the nature of the cinematographer-director collaboration and its limitations. Specifically, it examines how Figueroa's work has come to be viewed, almost exclusively, in terms of his partnership with director Emilio Fernández; how this has obscured appreciation of Figueroa's work and how critical frameworks over the past forty years that look *into* the films that he shot have suppressed the fundamental act of looking *at* what he projected onto the screen.

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### Chapter Three

#### **Inventing Mexico: Going Beyond the 'Fernández-Figueroa Style'**

Despite a filmography that numbers more than two hundred productions, Figueroa's cinematographic style has become synonymous with the twenty-four films he shot with director Emilio Fernández.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Their thirteen-year collaboration between 1943 and 1956 was highly successful in terms of both box office receipts and critical acclaim. While it is apparent that Figueroa's collaboration with Fernández produced some of the cinematographer's most significant work, the tendency for scholars and critics to study those films alone has functioned to diminish Figueroa's overall achievements as a director of photography. Moreover, the attention placed on the collaboration with Fernández has concealed the importance of Figueroa's work with a range of other Mexican directors over the forty-seven years of his career.

As discussed in the introduction, Figueroa's association with Fernández, together with the public prestige and the widespread recognition he enjoyed as

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a union leader and civic negotiator, established him as an iconic figure in Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This status as an icon and the aura of mysticism that surrounds his work makes a thorough and objective analysis of his work a challenge. This is not to say that Figueroa has not been subject to critical attention. However, despite the several publications dedicated to his life and work, the only serious examination of his cinematography to date are two essays written by US film scholar Charles Ramírez Berg: 'Figueroa's Skies and Oblique Perspective, Notes on the Development of the Classical Mexican Style' (1992) and 'The Cinematic Invention of Mexico: The Poetics and Politics of the Fernández-Figueroa Style' (1994).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Whilst Ramírez Berg's essays have much to recommend them, not least because they are the only critical studies on Figueroa to date, a close examination of the articles reveals the limitations in his argument and, in so doing, suggests the parameters for a more comprehensive study of Figueroa's contribution to cinematography. An appraisal of the essays exposes assumptions that the writer makes about Figueroa's cinematography in relation to the notion of *mexicanidad* and also leads to a reconsideration of the way in which Ramírez Berg adapts the classical Hollywood paradigm of film style and his formulation of Mexican 'classical style'. Moreover, to go beyond the limitations of the 'Fernández-Figueroa style' paradigm and take a transnational approach, as opposed to the national bias of Ramírez Berg's analysis, provides an insight into the cinematographer's collaborations with other directors and the production contexts in which he worked.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As a result, the complex set of values and issues embodied in Figueroa's images begin to come into focus.

Following a detailed critique of Ramírez Berg's essays, I draw on the work of historian Seth Fein and film scholar Ana López as a basis from which I examine Figueroa's relationship to Hollywood and how the transnational is an inherent part of his work. Primary sources from files kept on Figueroa by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) provide empirical evidence of the complex transnational politics that surrounded the cinematographer and the Mexican film industry. The files, read in the light of Figueroa's exposure to,



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and adoption of, approaches pioneered by the left-wing German expressionist filmmakers that filtered through to Figueroa via his apprenticeship with US cinematographer Gregg Toland (who also had an ambiguous relationship to Hollywood) reveal the wide range of effects and, indeed, pressures that circumscribed Figueroa's development and work. As a result, the inherent assumptions in analyses such as Ramírez Berg's are re-evaluated and lead to a more in-depth appreciation of the transnational political and economic complexities that shaped Mexican cinema and determined its ambiguous relationships with post-revolutionary nationalist ideology and Hollywood.

### **Ramírez Berg's Oblique Perspective**

In his two articles Ramírez Berg identifies what he calls the 'Fernández-Figueroa style'. He links this style intrinsically to the nationalist notion of *mexicanidad*, a term that he (and indeed other scholars) employs uncritically and, as I shall show, does not define adequately. He structures his study of the 'Fernández-Figueroa style' around analysis of depth of field, mise-en-scène, camera angles, framing and composition in single shots taken from *María Candelaria* (1944), *La malquerida* (1949) and *Río Escondido* (1948). He also makes a detailed examination of curvilinear perspective which he categorises as one of the 'principal elements of the Fernández-Figueroa nationalist cinematic style' (Ramírez Berg, 1993: 35; 1994: 19). Composition in depth, complex mise-en-scène, low-angle set ups, framing with foreground figures and the use of a system of dialectical composition are the other main indicators of the style. These stylistic elements, Ramírez Berg argues, are a combination of and elaboration upon artistic influences from the Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada and painters Dr Atl, José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. For cinematic precedents he cites Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein and his cinematographer Eduard Tisse's unfinished film *¡Que viva México!* (1930); US photographer/cinematographer Paul Strand's work on *Redes* (1932) and briefly refers to US cinematographer Gregg Toland together with US directors Orson Welles and John Ford.

Ramírez Berg's second essay, 'The Cinematic Invention of Mexico: The Poetics

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and Politics of the Fernández-Figueroa Style' is, in fact, a reworking of the earlier 1992 article. The former appeared in the journal *The Spectator* and the latter as an essay in *The Mexican Cinema Project* (Noriega and Ricci: 1994). The re-publication of the essay in the Noriega-Ricci collection demonstrates the authority that Ramírez Berg's analysis of Figueroa's work carries in US-Mexican film scholarship. It is also noteworthy that the significant change in the title from the first publication is symptomatic of subtle changes in emphasis between the two texts. In the 1992 version, Ramírez Berg features Figueroa independently in the title yet in the main body of the text, his work is assimilated into what he calls the 'Fernández-Figueroa Style', which he proceeds to argue in terms of a classical cinematic aesthetic. In the 1994 version, however, the collaboration of Fernández with Figueroa is made prominent and the essay shifts emphasis to focus on the relation of style to politics and national identity. The later commentary also omits the historical background, which forms a major part of the introductory section in the 1992 version, and the definition and use of the notion of *mexicanidad* is absent, replaced by *lo mexicano*. Further, rather than present a discussion on aesthetic influences under separate headings, the later article is stylistically more fluid and integrates the aesthetic influences on Figueroa and Fernández into one longer section entitled 'The Roots of the Fernández-Figueroa Style'.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Certainly, the two essays provide a valuable starting point for discussion of Figueroa's contribution to Mexican cinema. Notably, unlike many other commentators on Figueroa, Ramírez Berg engages with the essential visual construction of the image. That is, he foregrounds the importance of cinematography to propose an examination of it in relation to ideology and the cinematic representation of national identity. He develops his discussion through a detailed study of two fundamental elements of camera work: composition and perspective. His comments on curvilinear perspective are particularly incisive and the stills and diagrams used to illustrate his argument enlightening. In both articles, Ramírez Berg makes a case for the foundation of the Figueroa-Fernández cinematic style in relation to Eisenstein, Tisse, Strand, Toland, Welles and Ford, together with a consideration of the influence of

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Mexican artistic antecedents, namely Posada, Siqueiros, Rivera, Orozco and the Taller de Gráfica Popular. Although not original, the compilation of these influences provides a useful overview of the parameters of the critique that surrounds their work.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

However, despite the groundbreaking contribution to the critical appreciation of Figueroa's cinematography that Ramírez Berg's work represents, it is timely to examine the assumptions that form the basis of his argument in order to go beyond the 'Fernández-Figueroa style'. First, Ramírez Berg's conflation of Figueroa and Fernández with regard to visual style restricts analysis of Figueroa to his work with Fernández. This significantly excludes comparative analysis of Figueroa's work with other directors (and indeed Fernández's work with other cinematographers) in the period 1943-1956. Second, Ramírez Berg's uncritical adoption of notions of *la época de oro*, *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano* and his subsequent amalgamation of these concepts with the classical paradigm is problematic and has ramifications for his conjectures concerning the ideology of composition and perspective.

### **The Fernández-Figueroa Conflation<sup>xxxiv</sup>**

The fundamental problem in Ramírez Berg's analysis is the equal importance granted to Fernández in terms of the visual construction of images. Indeed, despite the prominence of Figueroa in the title of the earlier article, 'Figueroa's Skies and Oblique Perspective, Notes on the Development of the Classical Mexican Style', from the first few lines of the article, Ramírez Berg links the cinematographer with Fernández in the creation of what he calls the 'classical Mexican style'. In fact, throughout his collaboration with Fernández, Figueroa had sole responsibility for decisions on camera position, composition, lighting and the use of filters. Figueroa described his working practices with Fernández as an agreement between them that he, as director of photography, created the visual style of the films (Thoyer, 2001: 98; Issac, 1993: 30). Fernández worked with the actors and editors and gave complete control to Figueroa for the composition, lighting and set up of shots. As Ramírez Berg specifically defines visual style in terms of composition and perspective, the areas for

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which Figueroa was solely responsible, his subsequent conflation of the two filmmakers' work into the Fernández-Figueroa paradigm is, therefore, problematic.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Moreover, to concentrate attention on one collaboration at one specific point in their careers ultimately excludes more diverse representations of Mexico that Figueroa and Fernández produced with different collaborators and which are apparent in the visual style of those other films. Figueroa may have shot twenty-four films with Fernández, but he also shot seventeen with Miguel Delgado over a thirty-year period (1940-1970), eleven with Tito Davison over a twenty-nine year period (1948-1977), ten with de Fuentes (1935-1940) and seven with Buñuel (1950-1964). He collaborated with all of these directors and others, in particular, Julio Bracho, Ismael Rodríguez, Alejandro Galindo and Roberto Gavaldón, before, during and after the period in which he worked with Fernández.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Indeed, the films directed by Buñuel, Davison and Rodríguez overtly question the social and moral mores of the middle and ruling classes and the consequent position of the dispossessed within the structure of Mexican society. This is not to say that the films Figueroa shot with Fernández did not deal with the conflicts of class, race and sexuality, but the conflicts are, in general, resolved on a narrative level and the fissures apparent only on closer examination of, significantly, Figueroa's cinematography.

### ***La época de oro***

Not only does Ramírez Berg conflate Figueroa and Fernández but he also situates them as central to the so-called *época de oro* of Mexican cinema. The dates for the *época de oro* are as indeterminate as the concept itself, but Ramírez Berg situates it as 1936-1956.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Although film production flourished by Latin American standards throughout the period, this 'Golden Age' was in great part due to foreign, particularly US, investment in the industry and the country as a whole (García Riera, 1988: 120). Significantly, although Ramírez Berg mentions the dependence of the Mexican industry on Hollywood in the first version of his article, it is absent in the republished essay. In both versions, he suggests that 'during the Golden Age, the disavowal

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of Hollywood's influences and the quest for Mexican roots reached its apotheosis in the films of Emilio 'El Indio' Fernández and cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa' (Ramírez Berg, 1994: 13). However, this 'disavowal' is complex and certainly goes beyond a 'tension between the adherence to the Hollywood paradigm and a rejection of it' (Ramírez Berg, 1994: 13). In his adoption of the nostalgic *época de oro*, Ramírez Berg avoids addressing the extent of the economic, political and cultural relationships between Mexico and the US. As a result, he fails to reveal how nationalist content and style in film production and the construction of concepts, such as the 'Golden Age', functioned as much to conceal US transnational intervention and Mexico's collaboration with it, as to boost national consciousness (Fein, 2000: 82-83). In so doing, Ramírez Berg, in common with other scholars, becomes complicit with the perpetuation of an inherently amorphous, nostalgic concept. Rather than address the political and economic issues specific to the four decades that followed the Revolution and that reached a height of labyrinthine complexity between the late 1930s and late 1950s, many scholars employ the term Golden Age or *época de oro*. As is the case with Ramírez Berg, they consequently avoid the inherent contradictions that arose between overt nationalist ideology, transnational political and economic relations with the US and the drive to modernity. Instead, they situate their arguments within a conveniently nebulous historical period, redolent with misleading nostalgia for a Mexico that is seen to have a clear sense of its own *mexicanidad*, situated in a stable and progressive nation state.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### ***Mexicanidad/lo mexicano* and Classical Cinematic Style**

Integral to Ramírez Berg's vision of the *época de oro* is a notion of *mexicanidad /lo mexicano*. The terms are fundamental to post-revolutionary, nationalist rhetoric and continue to resonate with a concept of Mexico as 'deep' and 'labyrinthine' as set out by Octavio Paz in his seminal study (1950) and more recently by Carlos Bonfil Batalla (1996). They, among other *pensadores*, have described and defined Mexican culture through highly personal insights which, although persuasive, cloud empirically-based analysis (as opposed to subjective opinion) around national culture (Lomnitz, 1992: 88).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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The project to define the national character predates the revolution and is evident from colonial times in the form of incipient Creole nationalism. However, the rapid shifts in political and economic power in the post-revolution period made the union of race, class and culture within a coherent national identity imperative in order to promote and maintain social and political cohesion. The definition of race and its relation to class and power is not only central to notions of Mexicanity, but also the main cause of the profound contradictions that occurred in attempts to formulate a homogeneous Mexican national identity. Therefore, when one examines 'such quasi-metaphysical terms' as *mexicanidad*, *lo mexicano* and *mexicanismo* to analyse the political contexts in which they were and continue to be employed, what emerges is an amorphous image of a politically and culturally independent Mexico (Knight, 1992: 99). In reality, these vague terms, with their undefined and imaginary Mexico, work together with ideas such as the *época de oro* to mask and passively support ruling elites and transnational intervention in Mexican politics, economics and culture.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Moreover, Ramírez Berg's declared aim in his articles on Fernández and Figueroa to reveal the ideologies implicit in the work of the two filmmakers is paradoxically compromised by his non-discriminatory acceptance and lack of critical engagement with these terms. As a result, he positions himself within the parameters of post-revolutionary nationalism and consequently prevents objective analysis of the inherent contradictions in that ideology and its ambiguous relationship to a transnational agenda.

Central to *mexicanidad* and *la época de oro* is Ramírez Berg's argument that the Fernández-Figueroa cinematic invention of Mexico developed the blueprint for a Mexican classical visual style (Ramírez Berg: 1994). He foregrounds this in the subtitle of his 1992 essay, 'Notes on the Development of the *Classical Mexican Style*' (my emphasis). Paradoxically, in this first version of his thesis on Fernández-Figueroa, he does not define his understanding of the term classical. However, in the reworked essay of 1994, his interpretation of the

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term is made clear, stating that Fernández-Figueroa adapted the classical Hollywood paradigm whilst they drew on other international sources in order to create a distinct Mexican cinematic aesthetic.

There are three areas to examine here. First, Ramírez Berg's understanding of Hollywood classical style, second his conflation of a classical Mexican cinematic aesthetic with the Fernández-Figueroa style during the *época de oro* and finally his evocation of the term classical in relation to Mexican cinema. These points then prompt the questions, why does Ramírez Berg invoke a classical style for Mexican cinema and what is at issue?

Ramírez Berg takes as his model the definition of classical Hollywood style proposed by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in their seminal book on the subject. Published in 1985, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* proposes a formal organisation of principles that nominates US west coast filmmaking as cinema's central stylistic paradigm. In so doing, it positions Hollywood as the progenitor of the commercial cinematic aesthetic and the determinant in the organisation of film industries worldwide. Ramírez Berg identifies three key components as fundamental to the Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson model: narrative structure formulated on Aristotelian conventions of logic and cause and effect; the establishment of cinematic time; and a spatial organisation with composition that privileges human figures in the film frame. A fourth element that he focuses on in detail later in the article is Hollywood's adherence to Renaissance systems of linear perspective. He goes on to argue that the nascent Mexican film industry not only imitated Hollywood's signifying practices, but also its industrial mode of production. He then proposes that Fernández and Figueroa simultaneously assimilated and rejected Hollywood and other international influences in pursuit of a distinctive national visual aesthetic (Ramírez Berg, 1994: 13). Ramírez Berg subsequently argues that the filmmakers' rejection of Hollywood's 'classical' tenets of composition and perspective established the basis for an alternative, Mexican classicism.

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Ramírez Berg's deployment of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's paradigm is, however, problematic. To define Hollywood as a classical paradigm transforms it into a universal model and in so doing situates it outside of its specific political and economic contexts. As a result, analysis of any non-Hollywood film becomes an inventory of assimilation and rejection of the constructed, monolithic paradigm that is Hollywood. Ramírez Berg, develops his thesis on Fernández-Figueroa precisely in this way, consequently reinforcing the hegemony of Hollywood and preventing analysis into the transnational social, historical and political complexities of the Fernández-Figueroa films.

In an enlightened critique, Christopher Williams throws Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's assumption of classicism into question by bringing to the fore the oppressive limitations their paradigm places on analysis of Hollywood films. He also questions the authors' 'unconvincing attempts' to justify the label of classical which has the effect of crushing the diversity and complexity of Hollywood production into 'crude and misleading' reductionism (Williams, 2000: 213-214). Likewise, in dubbing Fernández and Figueroa's work as 'classical', Ramírez Berg establishes a set of aesthetic rules that evoke a Mexican classical style against which all Mexican production is evaluated. Further, he unequivocally conflates classical Mexican style with Figueroa's cinematography. Yet, there is no discussion as to why Figueroa's work during the relatively short period of 1943-1956 should act as the classical benchmark. Moreover, although in the reworked essay Figueroa's status as progenitor of the classical style is not expressed as explicitly as it is in the 1992 version, it pervades the text as an unquestioned assumption.

In addition, Ramírez Berg's concentration on the Fernández-Figueroa collaboration locates the classical paradigm within the chronologically variable parameters of the so-called *época de oro*. His lack of critical engagement with the term *época de oro* consequently situates Mexican classicism within a perceived halcyon period of national cinema. The conflation of notions such as *época de oro* and classicism conveniently supports the concept of a stable,



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idyllic, creatively vibrant period in Mexican film and the idea that the apex of cinematic achievement could only flourish in such a propitious, bygone historical moment. As a result, the integration of Fernández-Figueroa/classical/*época de oro* forms a one-sided paradigm that restricts analysis of the widely diverse nature of Mexican filmmaking and the work of other filmmakers, not only in periods outside of the prescribed *época de oro* but also within it. Moreover, it confines analysis of the professional development of Figueroa and Fernández as filmmakers to a thirteen-year period and one creative partnership.

There is, however, more at stake in the formulation of a classical paradigm for Mexican cinema. Despite Ramírez Berg's stated awareness of the 'ethnocentric trap of positing Hollywood cinema as a formal ideal to which Mexican cinema was obliged to conform in order to earn legitimacy' (Ramírez Berg, 2000: 11), in his adaptation of the Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson model, he paradoxically falls into the very trap he seeks to avoid. Consequently, he validates and legitimises Mexican film production through a classical visual heritage. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between Hollywood's construction of classicism as universal - and consequently, nationally neutral - and the way in which Ramírez Berg intrinsically links Mexican classical style to its national specificity through the concept of *mexicanidad* (López, 1999: 423). It is precisely this uncritical adoption of nationalist rhetoric and the ideas it represents that confines Ramírez Berg's thesis. In his definition of a classical cinematic style in terms of its intrinsic Mexican-ness, during one of the key historical periods of nationalist sentiment, he ultimately seeks not only to legitimise the early Mexican film industry, but also to validate a nationally-specific, independent cinematic aesthetic. As a result, he restricts investigation into a range of visual styles employed by a variety of Mexican filmmakers. In turn, this limitation of vision hinders an examination of the relationship between a cinematic aesthetic and its wider social, political and historical contexts.

How, though, might this be achieved? One alternative approach that

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transcends the narrow constraints of the nationalist formula, as advocated by Rámirez Berg, is to engage with recent readings of Mexican cinema and film production that take a transnational perspective.

### **Transiting the National**

Ideas of the transnational are not new. According to historian Seth Fein (2003), transnational thought dates back to the beginning of the last century with the work of Herbert Eugene Bolton.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Recent scholarship, Fein argues, is more interactive than comparative, resulting in the transformation of traditional absolutist notions of cultural imperialism and cultural nationalism into 'contact zones', those 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (Pratt, 1992: 4).

Using Pratt's paradigm in his own work on Mexican cinema between 1930 and 1960, Fein suggests that the Mexican film industry replicated the extensive transnational interaction between the United States and Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Mexican cinema developed through what he describes as a system of collaboration, convergence and competition, but not confrontation, with the US industry and US foreign policy. Although Mexico's film industry grew into a national cinema it was not, contrary to many critics' interpretations, nationalist. Despite its anti-US rhetoric, Mexico's position, although antagonistic, has consistently protected the *relación especial* with the US, even if it has been at the expense of a chronic imbalance of trade between the two countries which has had serious consequences for Mexico's economy.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Ana López also acknowledges the US cinema's ubiquitous, international presence and the challenge producers have had outside of the US in 'facing up' to Hollywood (Lopez, 2000: 419-437). When, in the post-war era, Hollywood came to represent US cultural imperialism, many Latin American producers rejected its practices in the interests of national cultural specificity. However, in the context of new economic and cultural exchanges, there is a reconsideration of this image of cultural colonisation that has 'opened up a

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space for rethinking the strategies through which Hollywood needs to be 'faced' and the histories of world cinema' (López, 1999: 419-420). López suggests an alternative forum in which to address the apparent showdown between Hollywood and its others. She proposes the establishment of a wide-ranging debate around culture and economic relationships which examines the links between the national and transnational processes and how the fissures and contradictions they create may be revealed and understood (1999: 435).

The work of Fein and López provides a useful paradigm within which to consider Figueroa's work and his status as one of the major protagonists in the Mexican film industry. The brief overview that follows provides the contexts in which Figueroa operated and facilitates a consideration of Figueroa's place in the development of Mexican cinematic aesthetic from a transnational perspective, as opposed to the nationalist standpoint proposed by Ramírez Berg.

### **Transnational Contexts**

Both López and Fein open up a broad area of debate in their examination of how Hollywood, in intimate alliance with the US state department, developed economic and political strategies to strengthen its hold on markets abroad, particularly in Latin America. This it did through the establishment of the trade association, the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in the 1920s, which strictly regulated imports of non-US films and controlled exports of Hollywood films abroad through its offshoot the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA). Its work was mainly to curtail quota legislation placed on US films by foreign governments and ensure Hollywood's place as the dominant product in the cinemas, although 'mutual' agreements were often enforced by foreign governments threatening boycotts and distribution embargoes.

There had always been a US presence within the early Mexican film industry, but its direct intervention accelerated in the late 1930s (at the time Cárdenas was busily nationalising the petrochemical industry and railways) with a series

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of Radio Keith Orpheum (RKO) co-productions, which used Mexican facilities and actors to make films for the Spanish language market. By 1940, well before the US entered the war, a more overtly political intercession was evident, with the formation of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) under the leadership of Nelson Rockefeller. The Office, directed by Francis Alstock of the Motion Picture Division (MPD) and headed by John Hay Whitney, would supply not only equipment but also production funds and training to Mexican filmmakers.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Office had close links with the Motion Picture Society of the Americas, (MPSA) who advised the studios on matters related to Latin America.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In the interest of maintaining its close relationship with Washington, Hollywood mobilized to expand a competitive national industry that previously it had sought to undermine. In selling his agency's plan to the US studios, the MPD's Alstock believed that wartime assistance was not at odds with the US industry's long term interests, because it would spread film culture to new markets that US producers would naturally dominate after the war.

(Fein, 2001: 169)

It was clear that owing to the enlistment of workers from all areas of the industry and the reduction in budgets that the war effort demanded, there would not be enough films produced in Hollywood to cover demand in Central and Latin America. It was seen that Mexico could fill the gap in the market opened up by Hollywood's commitments to the war effort and the demise of Mexico's other rival, Argentina, which was under embargoes because of the pro-Axis stance adopted by its successive governments of the period. The Mexican government's own indecision on its position with regard to the war was resolved in May 1942, when German U-boats sank a Mexican oil tanker off the coast of Florida. The US rewarded Mexico's subsequent declaration of war on Germany, Italy and Japan at the end of May with shipments of raw stock and equipment to support Mexico's growing film production needs. This

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US support has been seen as a resignation to the loss of its Latin American market during the war years (Mora, 1982: 59). On the contrary, what the war secured was Mexican dependence on and cooperation with Hollywood, establishing the US presence firmly within the Mexican industry and Latin American cinema. Simultaneously, the US government, together with the administration of Manuel Ávila Camacho, whose *sexenio* as Mexican president started in 1940, regenerated strategic economic links between the two countries.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In 1942, the Banco de México, together with the government and producers founded the Banco Cinematográfico SA. The group founded the bank to deal solely with the management of cinema and film production funding. One of the key advantages to producers was that the bank could grant them and their investors credit for up to two million pesos, which was then repayable over a ten-year period. At the same time, the Comité Coordinador y de Fomento de la Industria Cinematográfica Mexicana was formed, headed by the director/producer Fernando de Fuentes (representing production companies and the studios), the Ministry of Interior's director of cinema, Gregorio Castillo and the leader of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (STIC) Enrique Solís. Their brief was to coordinate and encourage collaboration between independent investors, the state and the unions. The MPSA agreed with its suggestion to merge the Stahl studios with Azteca and to modernise Azteca and CLASA to establish them as the main studios for national production. The funding would come partially from the OCIAA and the finance to be administered through the Banco de México. However, in return for support for materials and finance, the OCIAA was to have control over the content of the films produced. This it administered through a cinema division the Banco de México formed whose declared aims were:

[T]o be the channel through which the Office of the Coordinator may take part in the financing of Mexican films which, by reason of their theme, educational value, or other special merits it might be difficult to produce commercially, but which would serve to

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bring about better Inter-American understanding, imbue the peoples of the continent with ideas of liberty and patriotism, or make known to the nations of America the history and traditions of the American Republics. The selection of the films to be produced under these conditions, as well as the amount of financing, shall be determined by the Mexican Committee with the approval of the Office of the Coordinator.

(Fein, 2001: 170)

Profits from these films would 'be exclusively for the producers [...] to stimulate them towards the Inter-American activities which it is desired to foment' (Fein, 2001: 170). With the major source of finance administered and controlled through the bank, with its intricate links to the OCIAA, the practical result was that no film was made without US approval. However, according to Fein 'coercion was hardly necessary; Mexican producers went out of their way to please US and Mexican officials' (Fein, 2001: 171). Indeed, the deal was mutually convenient for the US, with its push for Pan-American propaganda and the Mexican producers, who saw this as a way to make money with low risks and to begin to develop the industry.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In a seemingly paradoxical approach, the close alliance between the Banco Cinematográfico, the Banco de México and OCIAA, actively encouraged 'nationalist' films. However, given the contemporary scenario, it was not as contradictory as it appears. Indeed, it was in the government's and producers' interest to promote *mexicanidad* as a guise to hide the burgeoning US presence in Mexico. At the same time, national pride stimulated the internal consumer market and consequently benefited US market investment in Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The full extent of US intervention into the so-called Golden Age film industry is summarised in a comment made in 1944 by a top-ranking official from the US embassy in Mexico City: 'Mexican motion picture people [...] remarked that they can begin no picture, receive no allocation for their film stock, nor take any other important action without consulting Alstock or Fouce' (Fein, 2001: 170).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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Given such pervasive intervention from the US in the Mexican economy and the film industry, in addition to the transnational links encouraged by both governments, Ramírez Berg's belief in the *época de oro* and a consummate *mexicanidad* becomes a restrictive analysis, complicit with neo-nationalist sentiment, rather than a firm critical base on which to establish theories of Mexican visual aesthetic.

### **Figueroa and the Transnational**

If transiting the national paradigm provides a useful perspective from which to gain a wider understanding of the Mexican film industry, then an examination of a specific industrial area or discipline, such as cinematography, from a transnational viewpoint can be equally productive. In the final part of this chapter, I shall explore the possibilities of a transnational approach in relation to Figueroa and Mexican cinematography. The development of Figueroa's career exemplifies transnationalism in operation. Indeed, his central position within the Mexican industry provides a fruitful case study through which to explore how the close industrial, political and economic links between the Mexican and international industries, particularly Hollywood, impacted on the development of cinematography and film aesthetics in Mexico.

Transnationalism is by definition a complex set of interactions. With regard to Figueroa and the development of Mexican cinematography, there are two main areas to examine. First, there is Figueroa's preparation as a director of photography, the transnational nature of his entry to and training in the industry and the contexts in which he continued to develop cinematography throughout his career. Second, and intricately woven into Figueroa's development, is the transnational nature of film technology and language. That is, where and why technologies originated, how Figueroa (and by association the Mexican industry) acquired them and how he used and, in some cases, adapted them with his aim to create a Mexican aesthetic. A crucial question arises from these points – can there, in effect, be a national

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aesthetic, a Mexican cinematographic style? Indeed, can any country propose a *national* cinematic aesthetic, when the use of *multi-national* equipment and processes is dependent on the acculturation of set procedures and practices which dictate the way in which equipment is used and practices followed?

Significantly, in the many texts on Figueroa his relationship with Hollywood, although made explicit, is never analysed.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As indicated above, in common with Ramírez Berg, most writers assume a national stance when discussing the cinematographer.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Consequently, they fail to acknowledge the complex relations he enjoyed with the US in terms of his cinematographic development. Significantly, Figueroa often mentioned his connections with Hollywood in interviews, yet his links to Hollywood studios and experience with the US political authorities are simplified or ignored to fit a nationalist agenda. His complex and seemingly contradictory relationship with Hollywood is evident when one examines statements made by Figueroa in interviews:

Hollywood tiene un sistema; no han podido con ese sistema muchas personas, empezando por DW Griffiths, [...] Abel Gance de Francia, después Eisenstein y Orson Welles, ninguno de esos grandes artistas aceptó el sistema de Hollywood, y por eso prácticamente fracasaron.

(Huacuja del Toro, 1997: 31)

En fin, el sistema de Hollywood es algo que algunos no hemos aceptado por su hermetismo.

(Galindo Ulloa, 1997: 2)

By contrast Figueroa also stated:

Hollywood quedó en mi vida como un espacio de formación profesional y una oportunidad para conocer entrañables amistades y el trabajo de otros fotógrafos como Stanley Cortez, Lee Garmes, James Wong Howe, Bert Glenon y George Barnes.



This apparently ambivalent attitude to Hollywood, with on one hand, his rejection of the system, and on the other, his acknowledged connection with it, is symptomatic of the vacillating attitude the Mexican film industry holds in relation to Hollywood. However, on closer examination of Figuerola's professional development and the associations he formed within the transnational forum, fundamental to both the US and the Mexican film industries, his stance is not as contradictory as it may appear.

Even before Figuerola entered the film industry, he had become part of transnational processes. One of his first jobs was working as an assistant to the portrait photographer José Guadalupe Velasco. Critics have never cited the period Figuerola worked for Velasco as influential in the cinematographer's development, yet in his autobiography Figuerola acknowledges the seminal importance of his time under Velasco's tutelage (Figuerola, 1988: 24).

Velasco had been working in Chicago and on his return to Mexico was the first portrait photographer in the country to use artificial lighting. He was popular for his stylised portraiture and his theatrical manipulation of his subjects.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Figuerola's responsibilities as Velasco's assistant included retouching the negatives, printing and making portraits in the photographer's absence (Figuerola, 1988: 24). Velasco learned techniques in Chicago that he imported to Mexico along with the studio's lighting rig and cameras (Galindo Ulloa, 1997: 2). Through exposure to US photographic techniques, Figuerola became fascinated with the innovative and imaginative potential of lighting and printing, factors that would be fundamental to his working practices as a cinematographer. His exposure to new lighting and processing procedures became the foundation for his work to come, not only in his film portraiture of stars such as María Félix, Dolores del Río and Pedro Armendáriz, but also with his creation of atmosphere and ambience in studio and interior sets (Figuerola, 1988: 24).

Whilst Figuerola was working with Velasco, Gilberto Martínez Solares (who was also to become one the foremost cinematographers of his generation)

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introduced him to Alex Phillips. La Nacional Productora de Películas contracted Phillips, a Canadian director of photography in Hollywood, to work on the first Mexican sound film production, *Santa* (1931). Phillips was not the only non-Mexican or Hollywood trained crew member working on the production. Its director was the Spaniard Antonio Moreno and Mexican actors Lupita Tovar and Donald Reed/Ernesto Guillén had been working in the US industry before *Santa*. The lightweight sound system, developed by the Rodríguez brothers, Joselito and Roberto, in Hollywood was imported into Mexico for the film (García Riera 1998: 76). The transnational nature of the *Santa* cast, crew and new technology was representative of the early sound era in Mexico and, indeed, the film industry as a whole, with many technicians and actors moving between North and South America and Europe and the use of equipment developed and manufactured in Europe and the US by ex-patriates.

When Figueroa entered the industry, many members of the Mexican film community had been or were still working in the US. The directors Chano Urueta, René Cardona, Emilio Fernández and Roberto Rodríguez, the actors Ramón Navarro, his cousin Dolores del Río, and Lupita Tovar and Pedro Armendáriz, among others, spent a significant part of their careers in Hollywood or, as in the case of Fernando de Fuentes, had been educated in the US (García Riera, 1998: 81). Figures such as the Argentine producer Hanson moved between North and South America, working on Spanish language films for the Southern market and English language versions. Hanson, together with Paul H. Bush from the US, produced *María Elena* (1936, Raphael J. Sevilla), which was shot in Mexico and cut into a Spanish and US version in Hollywood.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Indeed, the Mexican film community epitomised the transnational nature of cinema. Raphael J. Sevilla had moved between Hollywood, Mexico and Spain to direct *Él*, which starred fellow Mexican Virginia Zurí (García Riera, 1992a: 113). Ramón Navarro directed *Contra la corriente* in 1935 for RKO. Lupe Vélez worked in England during 1935 and starred in three films. Lupita Tovar was also in England for *The Invader* with Buster Keaton and in Spain for *Vidas rotas* and in the same year

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Celia Montalván worked in France with Renoir on *Toni* (García Riera, 1992a: 207-208).

Figueroa came into this transnational, multicultural and technically mobile world on the invitation of Phillips, who offered him his first film job as the stills man on *Revolución* (1932, Miguel Contreras Torres). From stills man, he went on to be lighting director on *El escándalo*, directed by Chano Urueta in 1934, *Primo Basilio* directed by Pedro de Alarcón in the same year and Raphael J. Sevilla's *María Elena* in 1935. Urueta had trained and worked as a director for RKO in Hollywood and had been Tisse's assistant during the filming of Eisenstein's *¡Que Viva México!* during 1931-32 (Lesser, 1991: 38, García Riera, 1998: 87). Sevilla had also spent a formative part of his career as a technical advisor at Warner Brothers before he returned to Mexico to direct (García Riera, 1998: 85). Moreover, when Figueroa started in the film industry, the leading cinematographers were non-Mexicans: Canadian Alex Phillips and Jack Draper and Ross Fisher from the United States who, like Phillips, were contracted in Hollywood.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Hence the industry that Figueroa entered was, from the first, a transnational concern. Indeed, Figueroa's rapid rise over the next four years, from stills man to international award winning cinematographer in 1936, could be seen as a result of the relatively fast growth of Mexican filmmaking. Together with the dearth of adequately prepared local technicians and the encouragement and training he was given in Mexico and the US, his career was effectively 'hot-housed'.

The key point during the four years of Figueroa's speedy promotion to one of the central figures of the Mexican industry was the period he spent in Hollywood during in 1935, or as he puts it: 'Fue para mí un año decisivo. Aprendí los conocimientos básicos de mi oficio e hice amigos y contactos que me sirvieron toda la vida' (Issac, 1993: 26). The financier Alberto J. Pani funded his stay in the US film capital. Pani founded the new studio and production house Cinematográfica Latina Americana S.A (CLASA) with his son Rico, a group of entrepreneurs and a large government subsidy and offered Figueroa the post of director of photography in the new studios.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The reason why Pani should want to contract the inexperienced Figueroa in place of Phillips or even Victor Herrera, the most respected Mexican cinematographer at the time, is not clear. Indeed, Figueroa himself acknowledged his own lack of experience and at first declined the offer. However, Pani persisted and suggested that Figueroa take a scholarship funded from the company to study cinematography in Hollywood. Whilst in the US, Figueroa also acted as CLASA's representative and purchased two Mitchell cameras for the new studios (Issac, 1993: 24-25).

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On his arrival in Hollywood, the apprentice cinematographer spent the mornings at the Goldwyn studios in Santa Monica and the afternoons with Charles Kimball in the edit room where he assisted him on the Spanish version of *María Elena*, on which he had been lighting director. It was through his time with Kimball that Figueroa developed his awareness of the importance of the edit.<sup>xxxiv</sup> During this period, another Mexican editor Joe Noriega, an RKO employee, befriended him and introduced Figueroa to Marlene Dietrich, Stan Laurel, and Dolores del Río who, like many of the members of the Hollywood community, were immigrants to the United States.<sup>xxxiv</sup> But it was Figueroa's contact with Gregg Toland that was to be his most profound influence, not only in terms of Figueroa's development as a director of photography, but also as an illustration of the rich, complex cultural and aesthetic web of interactions between Hollywood, Europe and Mexico.

### **The Transnational Web: Toland and Figueroa**

In 1935, although he still had not reached the height of his career, Toland was considered one of the best directors of photography in Hollywood and had been nominated for an Academy award that year for his work on *Les Misérables* (Richard Boleslawski, 1934). Alex Phillips had provided Figueroa with a letter of introduction to Toland, who like Phillips, had been an assistant to George Barnes and Arthur Miller. Toland 'saw something' in Figueroa (Figueroa, 1988: 35; Dey, 1992: 36) and took him on as an apprentice to work on the shooting of *Splendor* (Elliot Nugent, 1935). Subsequently, the two men kept in regular contact. Indeed, Toland frequently visited Figueroa in Mexico to advise him on his work over the next five years (Galindo Ulloa, 1997: 2) and Figueroa took every opportunity to observe Toland at work and discuss technical developments with him in Hollywood. This professional and personal friendship continued until Toland's premature death in 1948.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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By the 1940s, Toland's contract at Goldwyn was unparalleled in the industry in that it corresponded to the above-line staff of producers, performers and directors. The contract granted him freedom to experiment with new techniques and to develop new technologies and style (Maltin, 1978: 17; Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985: 346). For example, when shooting *The Best Years of our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) Toland initiated experiments with sets that were of conventional domestic size and dimensions, unlike the usual studio set which allowed room for the camera and lights. Toland invited Figueroa to come and watch him work and discuss the challenge (Figueroa, 1988: 101).

Goldwyn's support of Toland was not, however, that of a beneficent patron who encouraged a struggling individual artist, as has been suggested in some writing about Hollywood studios' relationships with cinematographers (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985: 345). On the contrary, it was a sound business investment in order to improve the quality and efficiency of the production process. Therefore, the studio's finance department kept a tight control on the relationship between standard studio practices and innovation (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1988: 108-110).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The freedom that Toland enjoyed in his relentless drive to push the limits of the technology and to find the appropriate visual expression for a given film or sequence influenced Figueroa's own insistence to choose the productions on which he worked and his commitment to innovative techniques (Figueroa, 1988: 35).

Good photography means a good deal more to me than a well photographed picture, [Toland] said. A picture may have carefully considered composition, fine lighting, depth and character and still not be acceptable as 'good' photography... the competent cinematographer must get on his film, in addition to the above requirements, pictures that fit the dialogue, the action, and the subject matter of the sequence.

In other words, Toland, and consequently Figueroa were determined that the image should function as a manifestation of the internal world of the narrative. This view is linked to European Expressionist art in which the emotional and psychological inner core of the subject is rendered through non-realist techniques. Figueroa's self-acknowledged influences, Goya, Dürer, Rembrandt and Turner, were all precursors to the expressionists in their use of light, composition, chiaroscuro, contrast and their subjective approach to their subjects (Figueroa, 1988: 185; Lynton, 1981: 30-49). Figueroa also wrote that German expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) and *Faust* (F.W. Murnau, 1926) were influential on him (Figueroa, 1988: 185).

Significantly, Toland shot director/cameraman Karl Freund's *Mad Love/The Hands of Orlac* in 1935, the year that Figueroa studied with him. Freund had been a cinematographer at UFA, Berlin's internationally renowned film studios, and shot *Metropolis* with Lang and *The Last Laugh* (1924) and *Satanas* (1920) with Murnau before arriving in Hollywood with the many other German émigrés in the early to mid-1930s. Freund, the leading exponent of German cinematography, employed all the established conventions of expressionist style in his use of fluid camera movements, extreme angles and lighting techniques. His influence is evident in Toland's work and not only on the films on which they collaborated. *Wuthering Heights* (William Wyler, 1939) for which Toland won an Oscar, *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940), *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941) and the seminal *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) are a few examples of the way in which Toland incorporated and developed Freund's techniques.

Although Toland (and subsequently Figueroa) significantly extended the application of expressionist technique in film, the two cinematographers are most renowned for their exploration of depth of field and perspective.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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The development of new faster film emulsions throughout the 1930s, together with advances in lighting technology, allowed Toland to experiment with smaller apertures and thereby increase focal depth.<sup>xxxiv</sup> I argue that Toland's aim, and certainly Figueroa's pursuit of depth of field, was to search for greater expression of the internal integrity of the narrative themes of the production. Their connection to the European expressionist techniques and aesthetic practices of filmmakers such as Freund confirms this and highlights the transnational nature of not only their personal work but also of all film production in Hollywood during the 1930s.

Both Hollywood and the Mexican film industry of the 1930s and early 1940s were spaces where aesthetics and practices convened and struggled with each other. Whereas Fein has so lucidly argued that the transnational, in terms of politics and economics, were integral to the Mexican industry, I would argue that the transnational extended to aesthetic approaches and that this was particularly apparent in the development of cinematography. As Hollywood repositioned peripheral personalities like Toland to the centre of the system, any political ambiguity and conflict within the product, the films, could be contained and in so doing the ruling elite in Hollywood maintained not only control over the means of production, that is the technology, but also contained any potentially subversive ideas and philosophies that resulted from any challenge to established conventions.

Further, besides his obvious technical and aesthetic influence, Toland also championed and passed onto Figueroa a re-assessment of the traditional role and function of the cinematographer. His unprecedented contract with Goldwyn disrupted the notion of the above-line and below-line hierarchy and Toland maintained a privileged status within Hollywood, despite the fact that his work at times caused controversy and exposed fissures in the system that produced the films. Figueroa's contact with Toland made him aware of the importance of his own position in the Mexican film industry and culture and he handled his career and subsequent iconic status with care. He used his position to function as a negotiator between the Mexican political elite and

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the workers, particularly in his union role as the head of the camera and technicians' sector, of which he was a founder member, and in the formation of Film Mundiales.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to take into account that transnational processes are not evenly weighted, nor easily analysed. Figueroa's career and aesthetic drive evolved in a politically and socially complicated arena. It would be intellectually convenient to assume that Figueroa maintained complete control over the artistic, personal and professional choices he made and that he maintained a carefully managed professional life, based on simple decisions. Indeed, this is the impression given by his own comments and the writings of commentators such as Issac (1993) and Poniatowska (1996). When Figueroa wrote that it would have been a 'serious mistake' (1988: 197) to accept the offer Sam Goldwyn made to him to take Toland's place at his studios, he justified his decision on the grounds that he preferred to remain in the creative and 'mystical ambience' of Mexico. He argued that it would have been impossible to explore cinematographic style in the way he would wish outside of his home country (Rivera, 1995: 60). Certainly, these may have been factors in his decision. However, one has to consider Figueroa's choice to remain in Mexico from a more empirical standpoint of his historical, transnational context. That is, the knotty set of political, social and economic ties between Mexico and the US that played out in the constantly evolving contact zone of a new conflict, the Cold War.

### **Figueroa's Cold War**

The close transnational alliances forged between Hollywood and the Mexican industry before and during the World War II continued to develop during the post-war period and went hand in hand with Mexico's move to the right in national politics. The political shift to the right coincided with the development of the Cold War and the US anti-communist purges. President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) continued Ávila Camacho's development of the private sector and moved even further away from nationalisation and social reform in the name of modernisation and progress.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Indeed, during the Alemán presidency social welfare expenditure dipped to an all-time low of 13.3% of total government expenditure (Erfani, 1995:



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74). The regime had to find a way to justify its abandonment of peasant welfare and employed the Mexican film industry to modernise and reshape the nationalist discourse of the war years by updating the notion of defending *la patria* against ideologically subversive forces. As a result, the government justified continued promotion of industrial wealth at the expense of social reform by stating that capitalism assured the security of all Mexicans, despite the fact that the wealth produced did not disseminate beyond the ruling elite. But where were Figueroa and his work situated in relation to these economically motivated political strategies? To tease out the tangled situation outlined above, and examine it in relation to Figueroa, exposes the inherent fissures of US-Mexican relations during this period and demonstrates how the workings of transnational politics and economics affected Mexican film production during the Cold War period.

During the war, Figueroa had played a key role in Rockefeller's drive for visual education in Latin America. In 1942, he attended seminars along with other cultural workers, doctors and educators, at the Disney studios. These discussions were to develop ideas for short films aimed at Latin American audiences to combat illiteracy, poor hygiene and improve health and agricultural methods (Figueroa, 1988: 131-132). In 1945, the film magazine *Novelas de la pantalla*, outlined Figueroa's ideas for visual education in Mexico. Short films from the US would be adapted and others produced in Mexico in close conjunction with the film union (García Riera, 1992c: 215). By 1948, the think-tank sessions of 1942 had developed into a highly organised system of propaganda administered through the United States Information Service (USIS). US-loaned projectors showed films to workers in major Mexican industrial companies throughout the republic. A US embassy sound truck transported a screen and projector around the country to project films in schools and colleges and was put into service at political rallies and public events, in conjunction with Mexican operators, under the auspices of the Filmoteca Nacional. In a looking-glass inversion of the Soviet agitprop trains of the 1920s, trains travelled the country projecting US industrial capitalism rather than universal socialism and transcended the Mexican border, physically and ideologically.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, by 1950 the US State Department had changed its remit and prioritised its contact with 'active labor collaborators', not in the name of

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social welfare and health, nor indeed to further industrial capitalist working practices and systems, but rather to undermine potential communist subversion in the union movement (Fein, 1998: 412).

Fein suggests that both Figueroa and Fernández 'served [...] the anti-communist cinematic crusade of Hollywood (and the US State Department)' (2000: 87). Superficially, this may appear to be the case, particularly in the light of Figueroa's enthusiasm for the visual education programme and Fein's interpretation of John Ford's 1947 film *The Fugitive*, shot by Figueroa and co-produced by Fernández. However, despite Fein's compelling account of the film as an anti-communist propaganda piece, I would argue that the film embodied a more complex situation. Fein defines the Mexican regime under Alemán and Mexico's film industry, as collaborators with the US capitalist, right-wing agenda.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In terms of Alemán's political ambitions, this is certain. However, in relation to key figures within the film industry, specifically Figueroa, there is firm evidence to suggest otherwise, making analysis of Figueroa's role in cultural politics more complicated than Fein suggests.

In a memorandum dated 26 April 1967, the US embassy legation in Mexico City wrote to the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in Washington with regard to Figueroa:

In view of the Subject's prominence as a motion picture director [sic], his relationship to former Mexican President ADOLFO LOPEZ MATEOS, and the ease with which he obtains visas by waiver from the INS for travel to the United States, this Office feels no continuous investigation of his activities is warranted.

(Memorandum 4-26-67 Ref: (105-3040) Re Mex letter to Bureau 3-6-67 FBI file no 100-368518)

There is no indication as to when the FBI instigated constant surveillance of Figueroa, but available records show that investigation and recording of his movements were firmly in place by 1950, as evidenced in a memorandum from the legal attaché at the Embassy in Mexico City to the director of the FBI:

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It is believed that the Bureau has considerable material in its files concerning the above individual. [...] FIGUEROA's political tendencies are generally regarded as pro-communist and his name has been connected with various front group activities.

(Memorandum from the legal attaché at the Embassy in Mexico City to the director of the FBI, 10.3.50 FBI file no 100-368518)<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Despite the recommendation in the memo of 1967, observation certainly continued into the 1970s and probably beyond.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However limited the information, it is evident from the reasons given to withhold documents by the US Department of Justice and the State Department that Figueroa, far from being considered an ally in the 'crusade' against communism, was in fact a risk to US national security.

It was an offer made by John Ford to Figueroa after the shooting of *The Fugitive* that first revealed the FBI's investigation of Figueroa. Figueroa had signed a three-picture contract with Ford's production company, Argosy (Issac, 1993: 38; Figueroa, 1988: 40). However, the union, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts of the United States, (IATSE) refused him permission to work. The reason given was that Figueroa had instigated a ban on the processing of Hollywood negative stock at Mexican laboratories in support of the strike by US laboratory workers (Figueroa, 1988: 40; Issac, 1993: 38). However, Richard Walsh, the president of IATSE, had travelled to Mexico to interview Figueroa and, in a letter from Gregg Toland to Figueroa, the actual reason for refusal of the permit appears to be otherwise:

I will try to set down all of the facts and rumors regarding your shooting a picture here [...] I had a call from Herb Aller who is the business manager of the local. He said that he had just talked with Walsh [...] and Walsh had said that under no circumstances were you to be allowed to work here. He further said that he had just talked with you in Mexico and that you were a self-admitted communist. [...] Then I talked with Ford and he told me how Walsh had arrived in Mexico in an arragont [sic] manner and seemed to want to take over the affairs there. Ford told me of your conversation with

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Walsh and explained that Walsh had said to you, "You are talking like a communist". You had answered, " Maybe I am and it would be none of your business if I were." [...] As far as I can tell from here you will not be accorded the courtesy of working here for which I am truly sorry.

(Toland, 1947)

Rather cryptically, Toland adds, 'Personally I hope you do what I would do in your position. I'll let you guess what that might be...[T]ry not to introduce my letters to you into any discussions as I send them to you as a personal friend'.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Sixteen months later, in September 1948, Toland died unexpectedly at the age of forty-four of a heart attack. In the light of Figueroa's experience with Walsh, his refusal to take over Toland's contract with Goldwyn went much deeper than his publicly-stated desire to remain in Mexico to continue his cinematographic ambition to recreate the *mística mexicana* on the screen. With the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) trials still resonant in the international arena and the continuation of the committee's investigations, if Figueroa had moved to the US, he would certainly have faced the risk of being subpoenaed. This was confirmed when in 1951 he was named at the proceedings by director Robert Rossen and again in 1952, by Elia Kazan (Issac, 1993: 42-47; Figueroa, 1988: 133-136 and 212-234; Rivera, 1995: 62-63).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Following an interview on 9 March 1950 with Figueroa, Wallace Clarke of the visa office in the US embassy in Mexico City, sent a memorandum to the ambassador which was forwarded to the FBI. The memo records:

[W]hen the conversation drifted to his political beliefs and his membership in various political organisations in Mexico, he was unwilling to respond. He did, upon my asking regarding his membership in the Partido Popular, that he is a member of Partido Popular but that for some time he has taken no active interest because he was not in accord with some the recent expressions of that Party. He remarked that he has never resigned from the Partido but failed to explain why he had not done

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so... [H]e refused to discuss his political activities or beliefs beyond the statement that he was a member of the Partido Popular and he remarked that he thought he had said too much when he said that.

(Memorandum from Wallace Clarke to the Ambassador, 9.3.50 FBI  
File 100 – 368518)

Significantly, in public, Figueroa always stated that his politics were a personal matter and categorically denied membership of any political party (Issac, 1993: 38; 49; de Orellana, 1988: 44; Poniatowska, 1996: 64). Yet, in the manuscript of his autobiography there is a section marked for deletion in which he writes that he was a member of the Partido Popular Socialista (PPS) for two months, but resigned because of proposed infringements of the party statute. Moreover, he had intimate personal links with leading members of the party. His sister-in-law and cousin, Esperanza López Figueroa (née Mateos), with whom he had a close relationship, was assistant to Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the Marxist former head of the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) and founder of the PPS in 1948. Lombardo Toledano was the foremost figure in actively challenging US-aligned capital development in Mexico in the late 1940s and early 1950s and in 1952 became the presidential candidate for the Communist Party (Fein, 1998: 415). Figueroa had known him since the late 1930s when Lombardo Toledano was still head of the CTM.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In 1949, Esperanza López Figueroa took over the administration of a major strike at the mine of Nueva Rosita y Cloete in Coahuila, on Lombardo Toledano's behalf. Figueroa became involved in the organisation and support of the strike (Figueroa, 1988: 201-207). Although the miners' action ultimately failed, the strike had seriously threatened the close links between the owners, the US based American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO), and the Alemán regime.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

However, it was not only his political associations that put Figueroa under FBI surveillance and his name onto the notorious Hollywood blacklist (Rivera, 1995:62). His activism in union politics was well-known. A keen advocate of the union movement, he resigned from the film union, Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (STIC) in 1945, because of the corruption he witnessed

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both in the union and the CTM (then under the leadership of Fidel Velázquez). He subsequently took a leading role in the formation of the celebrity-led and endorsed union, Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica de la República Mexicana (STPC de RM), (Issac, 1993:51-64; García Riera, 1992: 215-220; Figueroa, 1988: 112-128; Poniatowska, 1996: 58-63). Despite his involvement with the US and Mexican governments in establishing production links with Hollywood, through his contact with RKO and the US laboratories, much of his work for the union movement was in direct conflict with US-owned companies in Mexico, such as ASARCO. This, together with his active support of industrial action by the US unions, worked against the drive to internalise and project the US-Mexican *relación especial* to the Mexican people. Indeed, it often threatened its fundamental stability. Together with his assistance of the Republican refugees from Spain at the end of the civil war, his membership (however brief) of the PPS and close personal associations with other prominent left-wing figures in the cultural pantheon, including Rivera and Álvaro Siqueiros, Figueroa was, indeed, a prime subject for FBI investigation.

### **Conclusion**

The above evidence produces a conundrum. On the one hand, there is Ramírez Berg's questionable presentation of Figueroa as the ultimate nationalist filmmaker, the progenitor of an independent, specifically Mexican classicism, counter to US influence and intervention. On the other hand, Fein presents a transnational Figueroa, integrated into the US-Mexican drive against the left, a key player in the refashioning of post-war Mexican nationalism as anti-communism (Fein, 1998: 433). In the light of my own research, this hypothesis is equally problematic.

However, in a return to López's call for a wider ranging debate on the interface between Hollywood and Mexican industries, these overt contradictions can be examined as integral to the transnational processes between the two. It also has to be acknowledged that Hollywood itself was, and remains, essentially transnational.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Neither can one restrict consideration of the transnational in Mexico to its relations with the US industry and successive governments. Its dealings with other Latin American countries and Spain has to be taken into

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consideration, along with the immigration of film workers to Mexico, such as Luis Buñuel, Alejandro Jodorowsky and Luis Alcoriza.

Fein's lucid and incisive analysis of transnational cooperation or 'collaboration' serves as a paradigm for analysis. However, it is essential to be vigilant of the fissures inherent in any economic, political, social and ideological exchange. Fein identifies and exposes these at the level of government and within the wider canvas of events. But the inherent paradoxes within the gaps of the transnational process, the central knot of contradictions that contradict themselves, become evident on examination of the work and actions of leading members of the Mexican film community, such as Figueroa, whose work was intricately bound up in the transnational alliances forged between the US and Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Figueroa's career was not a smooth, pre-planned rise to fame to fortune as suggested by Poniatowksa (1996) and Issac (1993). His development of a cinematic style and its ideological content was not as straightforward as has been suggested by Ramírez Berg and Fein. As has been demonstrated, Figueroa's apparent choices were often decisions made under extreme political pressure and involved compromise and evasive action to allow him to continue his creative work. Nevertheless, the transnational economic and political forces that surrounded Figueroa in the first part of his career were, I would argue, fundamental to the development of his aesthetic that would have such an impact on Mexican cinema.

In the following chapter, I investigate how transnational commercial interests in the Mexican music and radio industries informed the nascent sound film in Mexico. In a close analysis of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1936) Figueroa's first film, I go on to examine how his emerging visual style embodied these transnational influences and, as a result, question the film as a nationalist discourse.

## Chapter Four

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**Composing Transnationalism: Visual Style and Song in  
*Allá en el Rancho Grande* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1936)**

The language of images is as complex as music.

Conrad Hall (Greenhalgh, 2003: 98)

Music is central to Figueroa's work as a cinematographer. Although few of the films can be formally categorised as musicals, many have a significant amount of song and musical sequences integrated into the narrative. Having studied violin as his main instrument at the national music conservatory, Figueroa had a thorough musical education and throughout his life he retained his passion for opera and music (Figueroa, 1988: 15).<sup>xxxiv</sup> An analysis of how Figueroa developed a visual style in relation to music reveals new perspectives on his work. His first film as director of photography, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1936), has a substantial amount of musical sequences. Significantly, the film established Figueroa's reputation, both in Mexico and internationally. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on this film as it demonstrates Figueroa's nascent visual language and the foundations of his cinematographic approach in his future work. Moreover, on close examination, the film also exposes the latent international nature of the burgeoning sound cinema in Mexico and how the cinematographer and the images he created functioned within this transnational production context at the beginning of his career.

However, before beginning a detailed analysis of Figueroa's visual construction of narrative themes in relation to music, I shall first offer an overview of the way in which music and sound has been approached by critics and scholars. This provides the analytical context within which I shall go on to a detailed study of the seminal film, *Allá en el Rancho Grande*.



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## Film Scholarship and Sound

Until the recent revival in sound studies, the visual narrative has been the primary source for film research. The picture in relation to the narrative has provided the basis to discover meaning in cinema studies, to the exclusion of any critical appreciation of sound (Sinclair, 2003: 17). This emphasis on the picture-narrative has evolved to such an extent that it has been claimed that most film theorists are 'deaf' (Stilwell, 2003: 74) and that film theory has been 'caught up on vision' (Kassabian, 2003: 74), the two camps of film theory and music/sound studies 'regarding each other across an abyss' (Stilwell, 2003:75). Although I agree with Stilwell and Kassabian that sound has been ignored, as I argue in Chapter One, the emphasis that scholars have placed on the visual has been limited to its function in relation to narrative and themes, looking *into* films rather than *at* them. Sound has been unheard in the same way that cinematography has been unseen. It is a paradox, therefore, that film theory not only appears to be blind to the visual, but also deaf to the aural. These impairments have consequently prevented a fully integrated critical analysis of music and cinematography.

The reasons proposed for the fissure Stilwell identifies between image and sound studies are varied. The editors of *The Velvet Light Trap* neatly sum up the situation as conflicts in ideologies and positions on making meaning (Stilwell 2003: 73). I would add that the abyss has opened because studies of sound and music are carried out almost exclusively from the perspective of post-production. This is understandable as the creative use of sound is produced by careful design and dubbing in post-production, rather than during recording. Sound, therefore, comes within the remit of the editor.

Subsequently, discussion focuses on the soundtrack's relationship to the pace and rhythm of the image (the editing) and not its association with visual style (the cinematography).

Given the above, one might argue that to write about a cinematographer such as Gabriel Figueroa supports and continues a bias towards the visual. Surely, such emphasis on the image is to the detriment of the soundtrack? However, in

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the case of Figueroa's œuvre, an examination of his visual choices in relation to the soundtrack, that is looking *at* the image, listening *to* the sound and then looking *into* the films, reveals new meanings that expose contradictions that have been previously elided. Further, if the visual-aural analysis is made from a transnational perspective, inconsistencies begin to converge. What emerges is a complex, yet more integrated, understanding of the mutability between film form, its ideological content and the wider, political context. I should like to suggest, therefore, that the critical gap between sight and sound might be bridged through an exploration of the cinematographer's work and its close interrelation with sound.

Each director's formal influences and chosen structuring devices informed Figueroa's visual style, together with the economic and political contexts in which the film was produced. Therefore, what follows is an examination of the transnational through the relationship of sound and cinematography in terms of form (the narrative structures and formal devices a film employs) and context (the political, economic and social environment in which a film is produced). This study will challenge the apparent hermetic nature of former critiques on sound and image whilst also breaking down the emphasis on the national in Mexican film studies.

It is useful at this point to give a brief resumé of how sound and its relationship to image and vice versa has been discussed to date. This provides the critical background from which I shall develop my evaluation of Figueroa's work in relation to the music in the film and the transnational implications that arise from the analysis.

### ***Talking about Talkies***

While it has been acknowledged that there is much 'uncharted territory' in sound and soundtrack theory (Buhler, 2003: 77), to date, soundtrack has been discussed exclusively in relation to narrative. This has been in terms of diegetic (part of the action and heard/performed by the characters), non-diegetic (external to the action, unheard by the characters) or a combination of

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both, intra or extra-diegetic (from a source we do not see, but that we know to exist in the story, for example, a voice-over of a character).<sup>xxxiv</sup> Its status established, sound is examined in relation to the construction of sequences and scenes and to wider themes, such as gender, identity or ideology. The result is an analysis of film that foregrounds the meanings contained in the juxtaposition between soundtrack and narrative construction. Therefore, in advocating the equal importance of sound in relation to the construction of narrative as a giver of meaning in a film, analysis remains blind to the visual content of individual shots in relation to that sound.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Until the 1970s, critical evaluation of sound in film confined itself to two general areas. On the one hand, film music, and on the other, study of the economic, historical and social consequences of the introduction of sound. A few early practitioners/theoreticians, specifically the Soviets, wrote of the aesthetic influence of the new technology, focusing primarily on its effect on montage and the political consequences of synchronised sound. *The Statement* issued by Eisenstein, Alexandrov and Pudovkin in 1928 was wary of the potential use of sound as a propaganda tool instead of what they perceived as the more creative use of sound as an element of montage (Weis, 1985: 83-85; Thompson, 1980: 117-119). French filmmaker René Clair shared their anxiety. His concern was that the image would merely become a vehicle for words and that the 'world of dreams' that the silent cinema evoked would be lost (Weis 1985: 92-95). However, despite the critical attention to sound of these early filmmakers, renewed attention to the function of sound, with wider fields of investigation than former research, did not begin to emerge for another fifty years.

In 1980, the journal *Yale French Studies* dedicated a special issue to sound. The publication suggested new areas for sound critique. Rick Altman's introduction gives a succinct outline of the visual prejudice in film criticism, from Eisenstein and Bazin to Comolli, Metz and Baudry. He calls for a more 'integrated approach to the entire film experience', away from the perpetuation of image-oriented film criticism. Yet, ultimately, his proposition is to privilege

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study of sound in film, rather than develop a new integrated analytical paradigm (Altman, 1980: 2-14). It is significant that the essays that follow support his position. The issue of the British film journal *Screen*, devoted to sound and published four years later, in June 1984, follows the same theoretical approaches as the *Yale French Studies* essays and does not address the interrelation of image and sound beyond montage. Subsequent to these dedicated journals came publications such as *Film Sound, Theory and Practice* (Weis, 1985) and *Cinema and Technology: Image, Sound, Colour* (Neale, 1985). The latter is exemplary in its analysis of the technical development of sound and the economic and aesthetic pressures that encouraged its development. However, Neale's clear account of how new visual conventions were established with the coming of synchronous sound, concentrates on issues of realism, the place of the spectator in relation to the narrative and the psychological effects of sound. Visual style is not considered.

In recent years, there has since been a steady consolidation of sound research. In 2003, an online discussion brought together leading scholars in sound and film studies. *The Velvet Light Trap*, the journal that organised the debate, subsequently published the discussion in issue 51. Since 1998, the conference 'The School of Sound', which as its title suggests brings together both theoreticians and practitioners for a wide-ranging series of debates and keynotes on sound as an academic discipline, as well as an industry practice. Selected papers from these conferences appeared as *Soundscape* (Sider, 2003). Significantly, the publication reveals that it has been film practitioners rather than theorists who have championed the intricate relationship between sound and visual style, the sound designer/recordist and the camera operator/cinematographer.

In the book sound designer Randy Thom urges all involved in film production not to limit their thinking of the project in terms of their individual crafts, but rather to view themselves as filmmakers, with an appreciation for the other technical areas (Sider 2003: 123). David Lynch (who, it is important to note, calls himself a filmmaker rather than director) echoes this view and uses music

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on set during a shoot: 'It really helps everybody get into certain mood. It certainly helps the DP [director of photography] because if he hears a certain music you don't have to say "Peter, slow this pan down" he'll react to the pace of the music'. He sums up the relationship between sound and image as "[B]eautiful. It has to do with all the parts coming together in a correct way. With sequences paced correctly and the sound and the picture working together, it becomes like music." (Sider, 2003: 51-52)

Figuerola's early work provides a useful example of how visual style planned in careful relation to music adds meaning to the film and propels narrative. Indeed, to open this discussion in relation to Figuerola is particularly apt. This is because before financial problems forced him to find a job as a photographer, he studied violin at the music conservatory in Mexico City. One of his first jobs as a second cameraman on *Viva Villa* (Howard Hawks, 1933) was to shoot with a hand-cranked camera on which he kept the necessary rhythm by singing the chorus from Verdi's *Il trovatore* (Issac, 1993: 19). Throughout his work with Fernández, a trio of musicians (*Las calaveras*) were permanently on set, playing to capture the mood of the scene between and during takes. In addition, these musicians featured frequently in the films. Indeed, his first film *Allá en el Rancho Grande* defined itself by its music and its title theme song.

### ***Sound and Mexican Cinema***

To understand the close analysis of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* that will follow, it is necessary to first situate the film within the context of early sound production in Mexico. This reveals how the nascent industry was intricately bound up in economic and technological transnational links that consequently extended to the cultural influences and the politics of Mexican cinema.

By 1931, the Hollywood experiment to produce multi-language films was failing for reasons that have been well documented (López, 2000: 424; de los Reyes, 1987: 115-116; de la Vega, 1995: 79). In July that year, Baltazar Fernández Cué, a Hollywood dialogist for Spanish-speaking films, arrived in

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Mexico as part of a Latin American tour. He reported back that, because of its proximity to the US and the large number of Mexican nationals trained and working in Hollywood, there had never been a better time to start sound film production in Mexico. Fernández Cué's trip coincided with the introduction of a higher tax rate imposed on imported films by the Ortiz Rubio government. Hollywood's refusal to pay the tax made film exhibition in Mexico (90% of which was composed of Hollywood products), come to an abrupt halt (de los Reyes, 1987: 117-118). Protectionist of the fledgling industry, the government blocked foreign competition. However, the industrial infrastructure was not yet in place and therefore there were not enough films made to fill the gap in the market. Certainly, this situation rapidly launched Mexican film production as an industry that paradoxically was and would continue to be dependent on the US and Europe.

Ironically, instead of reducing foreign interests in Mexico, by increasing taxation on foreign productions, the Ortiz Rubio government substantially increased them. The reality was that movie production in Mexico was already a transnational concern. Hollywood was the only training ground for aspiring Mexican technicians and actors and the new industry relied on the US to supply all its production equipment from the laboratory itself to lenses and moviolas (de los Reyes, 1987: 126-128). The first sound feature, *Santa*, was produced in Mexico only after its producer, Juan de la Cruz Alarcón, had failed to sell the rights to the major Hollywood studios (García Riera, 1992a: 48). The production imported Spanish director, Antonio Moreno, Canadian cinematographer, Alex Phillips and several actors who had trained in Hollywood, including the leads Lupita Tovar and Donald Reed. The Rodríguez brothers, who had been working in Hollywood, provided the sound equipment.

One of the most significant, yet rarely mentioned, influences on the newly established industry was radio and theatre entrepreneur Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurieta who exploited the technological and cultural links between radio broadcasting and film. Using his commercial interests in radio, he developed industrial relations that circulated music, narratives and stars between the two

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media (Hayes, 2000: xvii). Azcárraga had founded XEW, Mexico's first commercial radio station in 1930 and he rapidly acquired more stations along the Mexican-US border. He had been educated in the US and was familiar with US popular culture and commercial ventures. His marriage to the daughter of Patricio Milmo, whose banking firm had strong links to French capital, allowed him access to the finance needed to launch XEW (Hayes, 2000: 30).

More significant though, was Azcárraga's intimate connection with the US government backed giant Victor/Radio Corporation of America (RCA). As the company's sole agent in Mexico, Azcárraga had major interests in the growing media, including the film industry. Westinghouse, General Electric (GE), American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) and United Fruits had formed RCA in October 1919 to control patents for their companies. In 1926, GE and Westinghouse decided to branch out into the production of content, as well as the manufacture of transmitters and receivers for the growing industry and consequently formed the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). Three years later, RCA joined forces with Radio Keith Orpheum (RKO) as a protectionist measure against the growing use of their rivals' technology in early sound films, radio networks, phonographs and record production. By 1930, RCA had passed into the hands of Chase Manhattan Bank and, as a result, under the influence of Rockefeller (Neale, 1985: 74-85). The main roots of the burgeoning sound film industry, therefore, reached over the border and deep into the US economy.

RKO and its primary financial backer Rockefeller, together with the company's Mexican partner Azcárraga, became central players in the development of the film industry in Mexico during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The Mexican government's early and badly timed rejection of US domination of Mexican film exhibition was, it would appear, only cosmetic. What the ensuing rapid growth of the national industry achieved was a dependency on international talent trained in the US, equipment produced in the US and the financial control of entrepreneurs, such as Azcárraga, whose intimate transnational

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business links would inform the development of Mexican media from the 1930s and 1940s to the present day (Hayes, 2000: xvii).

Hence, it is not surprising that such emphasis was placed on music in Mexico's early sound cinema. It complemented and supported the related financial interests of major transnational investors. Indeed, 85% of the films Figueroa shot in 1936-37 contained long musical sequences. Although there was a sharp decline in the number of productions that were dependent on diegetic music during the early forties, music remained a significant element in Mexican films and was defined by the media as central to nationalist expression. It was certainly central to investment revenue in the related commercial radio and recording industries that linked directly to the US majors, such as RCA. One might conclude, therefore, that the musically dominated genre of the *comedia ranchera* was developed and encouraged in order to support the diverse, transnational media interests of the films' financial backers. The progenitor of this new, transnational, media-integrated genre was *Allá en el Rancho Grande*.

The *comedia ranchera* 'generously interspersed musical numbers punctuating a romantic story – typically a boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl story or a tale of rivals (best friends, brothers, cousins) vying for the favor of a beautiful girl' (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 98). Moreover, the genre is generally perceived as politically conservative particularly in terms of its portrayal and endorsement of an idealised pre-revolutionary past and sexual stereotypes, (Mora, 1982: 46-48). However, as I shall argue, close examination of visual style in the musical numbers in *Allá en el Rancho Grande* questions the widespread assumption that this first *comedia ranchera* is reactionary and reveals more politically and socially ambiguous themes.

### ***Allá en el Rancho Grande* as a National Counterpoint**

Figueroa's début film was a commercial and critical success in Mexico and internationally. It led the way for Mexican cinema of the late 1930s in terms of content and style of production and created a new musical genre, the *comedia ranchera*. At the 1938 Venice film festival, it gained the award for 'overall



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artistic contribution' and that same year a subtitled version was released for the non-Spanish speaking market in the US, making it the first Mexican film to win an international prize and to be subtitled. Although it made good box office returns in Mexico, its gross revenue was not exceptional. Significantly, though, it was the first national film to make money and gain critical accolades in the international arena (García Riera, 1992a: 211-212). Figueroa's visual treatment played a large part in this success and communicated to the world an image of Mexico that was to influence the production and reception of Mexican cinema in the years to follow.

Set in a hacienda in an unspecified rural location, the film centres on the relationship of Cruz (Esther Fernández), a servant and José Francisco (Tito Guízar), the foreman of the ranch. The pair keep their love secret, as Ángela (Emma Roldán), José Francisco's godmother, hates Cruz, the girl she was obliged to adopt at the same time as her godson and his sister Eulalia (Margarita Cortés). Formerly treated as part of José Francisco's family, Cruz is rejected by Ángela and used as an unpaid servant. Ángela prostitutes Cruz to the *hacendado*, Felipe (René Cardona), a childhood friend and, indeed, blood brother of José Francisco. When Felipe realises Cruz's deep love for his friend, he does not pursue his *derecho de pernada* and escorts her home. However, the couple are seen and gossip soon spreads that Cruz has spent the night with *el patrón*. When José Francisco is told of this by his arch rival, Martín (Lorenzo Barcelata), he challenges Cruz and discovers the truth, that Ángela sold her to the *hacendado*. Felipe arrives, the whole story is told and all ends happily with a group wedding, in which the main characters are married. It is important to add that within the film, three characters perform central, satirical roles that throw the film's apparent themes into relief and provide the only overt transnational and political references. These are Florentino (Carlos López), who is set up as a drunkenly-committed communist and two minor characters, *el gringo* Pete (Clifford Carr), from Denver Colorado, friend and supporter of Felipe, and Venancio (Hernán Vera), the Spanish, wheeler-dealer, bar owner.

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A key film not only in Figueroa's filmography, but also within the history of Mexican cinema, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* has been identified by critics as being contradictory and conflictive in terms of what the Cárdenas *sexenio* (1934-1940) represented and proposed (García Reira, 1992a: 213; López, 2000: 426-427; de los Reyes 1987: 145). Released at the time when the government initiated agrarian reform, a major part of which was redistribution of the *latifundios*, the idealised vision of hacienda life in the film, with its inherent caste system and outmoded traditions, appears anachronistic and reactionary. Although critics remark upon this inconsistency between the political context and the ideological content of the film, to date there has been no analysis of why such a rupture should occur.

Aurelio de los Reyes (1987: 142-154) discusses the transnational structural forms and influences that guided the film, yet does not address how these relate to the reactionary content he and other critics perceive in the film. De los Reyes suggests that the precedents for *Allá en el Rancho Grande* and subsequent *comedia ranchera* were to be found in popular theatre. He cites musical comedy and theatrical review as influential in the structure and content of the genre and particularly points to the Spanish light opera tradition, *zarzuela*, for the way in which songs are intrinsic to narrative and action in the film. García Riera also observes that the narrative was based on an earlier silent film *En la hacienda* (Ernesto Vollrath, 1921) that, in its turn, was based on a Jaliscan *zarzuela*, with the title of *Rancho Grande* (García Riera, 1992a: 212).

Traditionally, *zarzuela* is neither opera, nor a play. Imported to Mexico in the colonial period, the classical *zarzuela* is a mix of sophisticated musical ensembles and arias, verse and prose dialogue, popular songs and comedy characters. It is neither purely folkloric nor high art, considered too populist by some and too classical by others. The genre is divided into two types, the *género grande* which are longer and more operatic in scope than the *género chico* which are shorter comedies. The genre became popular throughout New Spain and combined all the elements of the Spanish model, but with local characters, music, dances and political perspectives (Webber, 2003). But

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neither de los Reyes nor García Riera acknowledges that in the colonies *zarzuela* quickly developed into a form of satire against the ruling colonial classes. Indeed, it was the most popular and often only form of political protest (Sturman, 2000). Acknowledging the satirical role of the *zarzuela* and the close association of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* with the form, consequently throws a new perspective upon the film and on the readings that emerge from close analysis.

### **The Género Chico at the Rancho Grande**

*Zarzuela* was essentially character driven. De Fuentes worked with renowned, sardonic theatre review writer Guz Águila (Antonio Guzmán) and centred the plot around a *charro*, José Francisco and *china poblana*, Cruz. These archetypes of Mexican masculinity and femininity had been central to the *Campañas Nacionalistas*. This four-year campaign from 1931-1935, to promote '*valores nacionales*' included one week of every month as the *Semana Nacionalista*, intended to endorse and encourage national productivity. The parades that initiated the national weeks were led by members of the *Comité General de la Campaña Nacionalista*, who would ride up front, dressed as *charros*, accompanied by women in the distinctive traditional costume of the *china poblana*. Even national days dedicated to the *charro* and *china poblana* were introduced (Pérez Montfort, 1994: 128).

The image of the *charro* and his *china poblana* had come to characterise '*lo mexicano*' throughout the 1920s. What they represented was a hybrid representation of the west of the territory, in the form of the *charro*, and the east, the *china poblana*, united through the *son del jarabe*, a dance music prevalent throughout the republic. Consequently, regionalism was surmounted by a unifying national image (Pérez Montfort, 1994: 118-121). The *charro* and *china poblana* rapidly became representative of Mexican masculinity and femininity. The typical *charro* was characterised by his heavy drinking, playfulness, national pride, romantic prowess, chivalry, strength and sense of justice. This male image integrated notions of manhood, nation and power. The *china poblana*, on the contrary, was a timid, discreetly flirtatious, yet silent

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victim (Pérez Montfort, 1994: 126; Nájera Ramírez 1994: 1-5, Mora, 1982: 56).

It is significant that the post-revolutionary, commercial film sector drew on the satirical, anti-establishment popular form of *zarzuela* and the nationalist stereotypes of the *charro* and *china poblana*. By contrast, state-sponsored films, such as *Redes* (Fred Zinneman and Emilio Gómez Muriel, 1934) and *Rebelión* (Manuel Gómez, 1934), celebrate the politics and perceived economic progress of Mexico under Cárdenas, incorporated what have been called 'first class, artistic antecedents' (de la Vega, 1995: 83). These are defined by de la Vega, in agreement with many other critics, as the work of Eisenstein, whose Mexican project *¡Que viva México!* is seen as seminal to the post-revolutionary, nationalist aesthetic. And whereas critics and commentators deride the more populist influences, adopted by the commercial producers, as reactionary and colonial (whilst not acknowledging the possibility of subversive satire in the films), the transnationalism inherent in the artistic influence of Eisenstein *et al* is applauded as progressive and paradoxically, national. This contradiction in the perception of diverse transnational aesthetic precedents has not been explicitly addressed as an issue in the development of Mexican cinematic culture. De los Reyes foregrounds it, but ignores the satirical content of adopted colonial forms and draws no conclusions. Most others concentrate on the artistic, rather than the populist, influences and, in so doing, avoid the issue altogether. What this points to is that many critics and commentators choose to disregard or deny the transnational foundations upon which the Mexican industry was established.

Having identified the transnational economic and cultural contexts of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, I shall now move on to illustrate how this context is evidenced in the visual style of the film. I will focus my study on two musical sequences. Figueroa's cinematographic rendition of the songs in these sequences reveals how closely the visual style and music work together in the film to create meaning and propel the narrative. The first introduces Cruz and Martín, José Francisco's rival and the second, which is also the last musical scene in the

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film, contains two songs sung by José Francisco, the theme tune to the film and the *huapango* singing duel with Martín, brings the film's narrative to a climax. The analysis raises some significant points with regard to the choices taken by Figueroa in the visual representations of Cruz and José Francisco, the heroine *china poblana* and the hero *charro* of the narrative. Combined with the lyrics, these expose the underlying and undermining function of transnationalism on representations of the national and reveal rifts and fissures in nationalist ideology itself.

### ***Dissonance and Displacement***

*¡Qué lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido!  
Inmensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento,  
y al verme tan sola y triste cual hoja al viento,  
quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento.*

*¡Oh! tierra del sol, suspiro por verte.  
Ahora que lejos yo vivo sin luz, sin amor,*

### **y al verme tan sola y triste cual hoja al viento,**

*quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento*

Cruz's song (*Canción Mixteca*, composer, J. López Alavés)

Commenting on the visual style of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, de los Reyes simply comments that the camera in the film 'forgot its job' during the songs and assumes the traditional position of a theatre audience (de los Reyes, 1987: 146). It is, however, apparent on viewing these scenes that Figueroa's placement of the camera and the composition of the frame is dynamic, considered and carefully integrated with the lyrics and music.

In the film, diegetic music accounts for 22 minutes and 28 seconds of screen time. This is broken down into three long musical-based sequences: the serenade sequence (6'25"), the cockfight sequence (6'05") and the cantina sequence (which includes the theme song) (6'05"). In addition to these long

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musical sequences, Cruz's song, the first music heard in the film, runs at 1'40" and counterbalances the final wedding scene that is a reprise of the theme song at 1'15" long. These two short sequences provide a musical overture and coda in the film and reflect the structure of the *zarzuela* form. Significantly, there are no orchestras situated outside of the diegesis that produce the intra/extra-diegetic tension present in the majority of musical sequences in Hollywood films of the 1930s. Indeed, at no point is any off-screen instrumentation used. Music is produced entirely by the characters present on screen. The only exception is three minutes of extra-diegetic music over landscape shots and the introductory poster to the cockfight. This overwhelming weighting in favour of music performed exclusively by the characters suggests that songs and music are pivotal to their development and, furthermore, that music performs a significant narrative function.

Most music in films of the 1930s, and indeed in contemporary cinema, is extra-diegetic. After the shoot, the composer views the film during post-production and constructs the score to the edited material. Subsequently, the music is often released commercially as the film soundtrack. As discussed earlier, over the past twenty years, there has been a steady interest by both musicologists and film scholars, in the study of film music. However, the focus to date has been precisely upon the film score, and the extra-diegetic function of music in a film. There has been little consideration of the role of diegetic musical sequences, outside of studies on the Hollywood musical. However, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* was not conceived or produced as a musical. Despite the large percentage of music in the film and unlike a film score, the songs in *Rancho Grande* were central to and present within the initial concept of the film and the film script, just as they would be in the satirical *zarzuela*.

According to both Gorbman and de los Reyes, songs are a pause in narrative development rather than an extension of it, a frozen moment in film time (Gorbman, 1987: 20; de los Reyes, 1987: 146). However, far from bringing the narrative to a halt, the songs in *Allá en el Rancho Grande* accelerate it and function, as they would in *zarzuela*, to propel the action. From pre-production,

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Figuerola was fully aware of each song's place within the story and its narrative function. As they were performed on set to playback, Figuerola would have planned his visual treatment of musical sequences as he would any other sequence. It therefore follows that he considered the visual style as carefully for the songs as for the non-musical scenes. Figuerola organised the composition, lighting, choice of lens and framing through close communication with the director de Fuentes, in order to correspond with the meanings and/or theme, whether explicit or implicit, contained in the scene. Rather than freezing the action, or positioning the camera to reflect the traditional placing of a theatre audience in the scenes, as suggested by Gorbman and de los Reyes, Figuerola's visual treatment of songs in *Rancho Grande* melts and blends themes and motivation, propelling both characters and narrative.

Throughout the sequence that introduces the adult Cruz, a typical *china poblana*, with her embroidered blouse and long plaits, the character's nostalgia at her loss of homeland and her sense of entrapment is expressed through a close configuration of the music and the visual style. The sequence is simply constructed around five shots: an interior wide-shot, a mid-shot of Cruz left of frame, a mid close-up profile of Florentino, right of frame, and two exterior mid-shots. In the composition of the establishing shot, Figuerola positions the camera to place Cruz and Florentino on the same plane of perspective. The framing, however, with the table, basket and a potted geranium on varying planes in the foreground and the bench in the background, provides visual layers of light and dark which provide depth to a potentially flat composition. The geranium at foreground right acts as a visual counterpoint for Cruz, balancing the frame. But what is most significant about this framing is that it forms one point within a triangle of three compositional elements. Cruz and the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the back wall establish the other two points. The Virgin is placed at the apex of the triangle, Cruz and the geranium are positioned at the base. This visual dynamic created by Figuerola excludes and dominates the seated Florentino and serves to emphasise the relationship between Cruz and the Virgin.

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Read from a purely aesthetic point of view, the triangular composition of this shot balances the frame, provides perspective and functions to establish a classical vanishing point to the rear of the frame. More significant though, is Figueroa's choice and organisation of the archetypal symbols, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the geranium, in relation to Cruz. The alignment of Cruz with the Virgin occurs in other scenes in the film, most evidently in the scene in Felipe's office. However, it is in this early scene edited to Cruz singing the lines, 'Qué lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido, inmensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento', that Figueroa's visual design of this wide shot establishes meaning for both the development of the Cruz's character and wider issues in the film, notably the notion of displacement.

In the film's narrative, Cruz was born, together with José Francisco and Eulalia, at the neighbouring hacienda, the *Rancho Chico*. As children they were brought by their godmother and Florentino's partner, Doña Ángela, to live at their present home, the *Rancho Grande*. As the children's mother had adopted Cruz, Ángela decides the young girl is not part of the extended family and therefore, should be the household maid. Cruz's nostalgia, expressed through song, for the land in which she was born, therefore reflects the displacement she has experienced, both in physical and social terms. Her displacement from her home together with the removal from her position as adopted sibling to José Francisco and Eulalia, have implications for the familial relationships that are established in the filmic discourse. Further, her enforced role as a servant marks a decided downturn in her social status.

It is revealing, therefore, that Figueroa's organisation of the shot should link Cruz and the Virgin as two points of a triangle. This situates Cruz, the displaced underdog, both within the ideal of the Mexican feminine archetype that Guadalupe represents and associates her with the Virgin's widely acknowledged role as the representative of *la Patria*.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In conjunction with the song's theme of the loss of homeland and the depth of feeling associated with such loss, Figueroa's visual construction of the sequence works to express Cruz's personal situation as a character and the displacement that she represents



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on the narrative level of the film. Simultaneously, his treatment of the scene creates the possibility of another level of reading of the film that exposes its political and cultural position in terms of Mexico/*la Patria*/the Motherland, as represented by the iconic Guadalupe.

The sequence of shots that follows extends the theme of displacement to place it within a context of entrapment which is captured by Figueroa with a wide shot of Cruz from the brightly lit exterior, behind the closed bars of the window over the lyric '*Ahora que lejos yo vivo sin luz, sin amor*'. The receding planes of flowers, the window frame, curtains and bars form frames within frames. This composition establishes perspective, as does the use of layered lighting that alternates dark and light to emphasise depth of frame, moving the audience's eye from the foreground white of the exterior wall, to the darker interior of the room in the mid-frame, to the background light splashing on the rear wall. Consequently, when the camera tracks back at a diagonal, Cruz's isolation is increased. The camera comes to stop at a position that frames the entire window. The vertical iron bars accentuate the entrapment created by the composition and lighting, which is further underlined when Martín enters. Whilst Martín is in the bright sunny exterior, Cruz remains framed in the dark interior. In the compositional flow between the Virgin and Cruz established at the beginning of the sequence, Figueroa sets up an internal conundrum in the film. With the creation of a clear link between Cruz and Guadalupe, *la Patria* paradoxically becomes a nation displaced. In the track back that frames Cruz behind bars, the visual metaphor extends to a nation trapped between darkness and nostalgia.

Moreover, when the film is approached from a transnational angle, issues emerge that have not been acknowledged in earlier analyses of the film. The view to date is that *Allá en el Rancho Grande* was a deliberate statement in opposition to the practices of the Cárdenas regime (de la Vega, 1995: 83; García Riera, 1992a: 236). But this assumes an interpretation of the Cárdenas policies as being radically national and left-wing. Certainly, with the election of Cárdenas and the exile of Calles in 1936, it appeared as if the *maximato*

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was at an end and a new direction would open for Mexico, in line with the aims of the 1920s. However, two powerful groups remained in Mexico whose agenda was far from radical. On the one hand, there was the old-moned, Catholic right, the majority of whose Mexican lands and business interests were expropriated in the name of the state, yet who had diversified their assets and interests to retain power through economic control (Hamilton, 1982: 35-40; Wasserman, 1987: 90). On the other hand, there was the new entrepreneurial class, the 'revolutionary capitalists' (Hamilton, 1982: 43), made up of men such as Aarón Saenz, revolutionary-turned-governor-turned-entrepreneur and business men such as Azcárraga, with their cartels and links with US and European commerce.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Both groups were in opposition to state ownership, seeing it as a threat to inherited wealth, private enterprise and an obstacle to the drive for free market capitalism. Indeed, 'already in the 1930s negotiations were underway for investment projects combining foreign, state and private national capital' (Hamilton, 1982: 51).

Meanwhile, Cárdenas, despite his proclaimed goals of 'state ownership of the means of production' and a 'workers democracy as the first step towards socialism', believed that the government should act in a conciliatory role between conflicting classes and ideologies in the interest of national development. Indeed, in February 1936 he stated, 'The government desires the further development of industries within the nation, since it depends on their prosperity for its income through taxation' (Ashby, 1967:33-34). What Cárdenas consolidated, therefore, and what, for the next seventy years of its rule, the Party built on, was a politics of containment for socialist capitalism, with an implicit understanding that there should be as much socialism as necessary and as much capitalism as possible. As a result, the structure of Mexican politics necessitated multiple ideologies that could work in parallel to support and contain the conflicting interests within the state economy.

The expression of displacement of *la patria* so subtle, yet nonetheless apparent, within *Allá en el Rancho Grande* could, therefore, be read as a reflection of the inconsistencies in the early years of the Cárdenas regime. On one hand, there

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was the drive towards a socialist-based, state-owned national economy that rejected past hierarchies and external intervention. On the other hand, there was the encouragement of transnational alliances and investment in profit-oriented industries such as radio, press and film to increase national revenue. Between these two goals, who, what and where was Mexico?

*Cruz/la patria* is at once revered and imprisoned in an idealised, feudal system, set in a remote, geographically unspecified region. She is the victim of the film, both in the hands of the peons/proletariat, represented by the wicked stepmother Ángela, who treats her as a slave and literally, in the hands of the dominant land owning class, Felipe, the *hacendado* who attempts to rape her. She has no place or status in the microcosm of society that the *Rancho Grande* represents. She longs for a return to a home that is unspecified and distant. The identity of 1930s Mexico, emerging from the violent conflicts of civil war and foreign intervention to the uncertain consequences of transnational, socialist, venture capitalism was also lost with no single ideological home base. Figueroa in his visual rendition of Cruz's song subtly expresses the ambiguity felt by the internal conflicts in contemporary politics and economics. This uncertainty is developed further in the visual treatment of the cantina sequence.

### ***Discord and Destabilisation***

In the *huapango con contestación* between José Francisco and his arch-rival Martín, the foreman becomes ostracised from the community and his status is questioned and threatened, all of which is reflected in the cinematography. On his success in the horse race against Rancho Chico, the newly appointed foreman of Rancho Grande, José Francisco, celebrates in the cantina. He immediately announces his forthcoming marriage to Cruz. His announcement is met with silence. Cruz was seen with Felipe, the *hacendado*, while José Francisco was away at the Rancho Chico and it is assumed that she has willingly spent the night with him. José Francisco, momentarily confused by the reaction of the men, breaks the tense silence by cajoling the crowd to cheer. Someone requests a song and José Francisco takes up his guitar. This cues the theme tune of the film. Significantly, the song *Allá en el Rancho Grande* is

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positioned late in the film, as part of the scene that sets up the final, dramatic climax of the narrative. However, in the duet that follows, the foreman's rival Martín immediately questions the role the song plays as the hacienda community anthem and the implicit inclusion of José Francisco within its society. The effect is an overt destabilisation of the foundations of the community, a displacement similar to that suggested by Figueroa's visual treatment of Cruz's song.

Figueroa develops the sense of non-belonging and dislocation throughout the scene by the consistent juxtaposition of compositionally balanced shots with set ups that subvert or disrupt classical composition and perspective. Certainly, in the establishing wide shot of the cantina, the inversion of the traditional vanishing point is similar to Atl's inversion of linear perspective, as discussed in Chapter Two. This opens out the composition to suggest space outside and beyond the frame. In the cantina it suggests the frame, indeed the film, cannot contain the potential of action and narrative. This gives an uneasy tension to the shot. The inverted perspective and composition communicates latent disruption. The following shot is a typical example of a conventional linear composition, which inverts the compositional elements of the shot preceding it. Venancio, the *cantina* owner forms the apex of a mid-shot, triangular composition, the two angles of which are formed by the line of the mens' hats and paralleled by the positioning of their arms towards the bottle on the bar and Venancio. However, figures wipe the frame constantly, moving in front of and behind the action, to compress the composition and extend the action outside of the frame. Emeterio's news that Cruz has been seen with Felipe, is shown in a brief montage of mid close-up shots of men in the bar as they repeat Cruz's name and the phrase 'con el patrón'. The news creates tension, disapproval and speculation. Hats and parts of faces and hands impinge on the outer edges of each shot. The montage edit gives the impression that the news is running around the cantina. Together with Figueroa's decision to disrupt the edges of frame, the sense of tension created in the opening wide-shot is brought to a head.

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The friction established by the subtle disruption of visual perspective and balance, the placement of the camera, the framing and lighting, as José Francisco emerges from the shadows and enters the cantina, creates further suspense. Although the feeling of the crowd that engulfs José Francisco at this point is genial, the framing and composition places him in a vulnerable position. When he announces Cruz's name, he is in mid close-up. There is no focal depth in the shot, indicating that Figueroa chose a lens with shorter focal length. The effect is to isolate José Francisco from the crowd that responds to his announcement with a stony silence. José Francisco, momentarily taken aback, cajoles the men into cheering. They then ask for a song.

Having set up tension in the preceding sequence of shots, Figueroa now makes bolder compositional choices in the way in which he shoots the two musical numbers that follow. These two songs are central to the meaning of the film. The first is the theme song *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, the second is the *huapango con constestación*, between José Francisco and Martín, during which Martín reveals the news about Cruz and Felipe. There is a distinct development in visual style throughout the two songs that underlines the increasing tensions that come to a head at the end of the *huapango*.

During José Francisco's rendition of the theme song, the first five shots of this twenty-three shot sequence intercut a mid-shot and a reverse shot of José Francisco, showing the crowd of men listening, with a three-quarter profile, high-angle shot of the foreman surrounded by a sea of round hats. The composition in each of these shots is balanced, privileging José Francisco and emphasising his central position and role within the hacienda community and the narrative. This opening establishes a link between the lyrics and meaning of the song to the character. José Francisco is part of Rancho Grande.

*Allá en el rancho grande,  
allá donde vivía,  
había [sic] una rancherita,  
que alegre me decía.*

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This is subsequently underlined by a series of six shots juxtaposing close-ups of men, who interject questions between the lyrics to push the song's narrative along, against the established mid-shot of José Francisco.

*Te voy hacer tus [sic] calzones (¿cómo?)*

*Como los usa el ranchero.*

*Te los empiezo de lana (¿y luego?)*

*Te los acabo de cuero.*

De Fuentes, who edited the film as well as directed it, builds a rhythm which is paralleled in the visual style through a set of similar close-ups intercut with José Francisco's main mid-shot during the verse. The repeated use of these close-ups and the mid-shot demonstrates the centrality of José Francisco within the mise-en-scène and the hacienda society. The following verse follows the same editing pattern. However, the shot of José Francisco is now a mid close-up which is intercut with close-ups of three other men, once more shouting comments in reply to the lyrics.

The two series of shots build a frank and open camaraderie between the men and José Francisco in distinct contrast to the silence that has just met him on his announcement. The tension would appear at this point to have been resolved. However, the penultimate shot is a profile, low-angle of José Francisco. From this angle, José Francisco's position up above the men is emphasised but, significantly, he is positioned in the third-left of frame in opposition to the men who take up two thirds of the right of frame in a semi-circle around him. Venancio, his back to camera, is positioned bottom-left of frame just behind José Francisco to balance the figure in right-hand bottom frame, but the composition also suggests that, rather than in control, José Francisco is actually surrounded and vulnerable. The final shot is an extreme high-angle down onto the entire crowd and José Francisco. Despite the communal singing and jovial gestures during this final chorus of the song, Figueroa's choice of angle exaggerates the foreman's vulnerability. From the

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high-angle he is a lone figure at bottom-left of screen, ensnared by three rows of men. Their circular composition is mirrored by their circular hats.

The lyrics of the theme song, the performance by José Francisco and its reception by the cantina audience, appear to affirm the foreman's kinship to the Rancho Grande and its community, his pivotal role at the hacienda reflected in the collective acknowledgement of his status. However, a closer examination of Figueroa's compositional choices in relation to the lyrics and the rhythm of the edit, exposes a tension. At this point in the scene, José Francisco is unaware of what has happened with Cruz. Therefore, suspense is created in both the audience at the cantina and the film viewer who have the information about Cruz but also know that José Francisco is unaware of what has happened. It is in the song that immediately follows the theme tune, where the tension reaches a climax and the news about Cruz is revealed.

The *huapango con contestación*, sung by two singers, works to a ten beat format and the singers establish and improvise the content. Martín is jealous of José Francisco who has been promoted above him to the job as foreman, won the inter-hacienda horse race and will marry Cruz, three of Martín's ambitions. Bitter and jealous, Martín now sees a way to avenge himself. He is aware of the information about Cruz and uses it against José Francisco. But more significantly, he questions the status of the new foreman, his right to even call himself part of Rancho Grande, as he was not born at the hacienda. This situates José Francisco outside of the hacienda society and opens the way to question his ethics and his honour, two defining attributes of the *charro*.

The visual patterns built up during the previous sequence now develop further. Figueroa establishes the two men in compositionally balanced mid-shots, which intercut the first three verses at an even pace. However, in verse four Martín's response goes beyond the previously good-humoured, mutual criticism, to suggest that José Francisco has lost his credibility and reputation.

*Las lumbres que yo he prendido no las apaga cualquiera (repeats)*

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## No todos somos iguales andando en la quemadera

*Yo conozco caporales que se queman en la hoguera*

Before this verse, Figueroa places the camera at an extreme high-angle of the entire group. A sea of hats surrounds José Francisco at the bar, left of frame and Martín stands right of frame. There is a clear line of figures between the two men watching them closely. Figueroa's choice to use such an extreme angle underlines the subtext of Martín's verse. The angle has the effect of alienating the audience and setting the foreman within the context of the community. From this point on, as the criticisms become insults, Figueroa frames the shots more tightly. When José Francisco replies accusing Martín of envy, Martín is framed in mid close-up in frame.

*Hay uno que en el cantar da su envidia a conocer (repeats)*

*Por que no fue caporal ni lo quiso una mujer*

*Corrió al palomo tan mal que al patrón hizo perder*

Figueroa uses a short, focal-length lens that cuts detail from the background to isolate him in shot. The sudden silence of the cantina together with the tight framing take the sequence away from a jovial group entertainment to a metaphorical duel between the two men. Martín replies with a verse that breaks with the established *huapango* structure.

*Vale más saber perder y guardar bien el honor*

*Con la mujer que uno quiere, no hay que hacer combinación*

*Si pierdo revancha tomo y a la Cruz de mi pasión*

*Por un caballo palomo no se la cambio al patrón*

The sequence climaxes with this accusation in a close-up of José Francisco's face. His expression turns from bewilderment to anger. Figueroa positions Martín in a wider mid-shot, central to frame and in control. As the foreman jumps down from the bar in the following shot, he destroys the balance of the frame that has been established around him. The composition is set off-centre



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and, surrounded by the men in the cantina, José Francisco suddenly appears vulnerable in contrast to the strong composition that favours Martín in the preceding shot.

As in Cruz's song, issues of status and belonging are brought to the fore. During both of the cantina songs José Francisco's right to be in Rancho Grande, his status, ethics as foreman and honour as a man at the ranch are questioned. He is an outsider. Although he feels he belongs and is accepted, the lyrics of the *huapango* and the way in which Figueroa develops the composition, reveal an underlying rejection of José Francisco, the ultimate *charro*.

It could be argued that the 'happy ending' to the film offers narrative closure and resolves the issue of José Francisco's displacement through his reconciliation with Felipe and the subsequent final, jaunty wedding scene that reprises the film's theme tune. However, an examination of Figueroa's visual design in these two final scenes undermines the apparent resolution of the themes of belonging and identity offered by the narrative.

Throughout the confrontation with Felipe, Figueroa frames José Francisco and Cruz in opposition to the *hacendado* and the members of the Rancho Grande community who surround him in frame. The reconciliation brings the two men only briefly into a two-shot before cutting to the final scene. In the brief wedding sequence that ends the film, the characters emerge from the church after a communal marriage ceremony accompanied by the theme song of the film. The first couple to enter and exit frame are Felipe and Marcelina (Dolores Camarillo), followed by the *charro* José Francisco and *china poblana* Cruz. Significantly, Jose-Francisco's sister, Eulalia exits with the *hacendado* of the Rancho Chico, Don Rosendo, demonstrating her return to Rancho Chico. The last couple Angela and Florentino, who have lived together unmarried for years, exit last. The couples enter and leave frame quickly. There is no moment in which any couple is in frame with another. Far from presenting reconciliation and transformation, the class and hacienda hierarchy remain

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unchanged, with the *hacendado* and his new bride leading the procession from the church and Florentino and Ángela coming last.

Figuroa positions Cruz and José Francisco apart from the wider community of Rancho Grande in these last two scenes of the film. He visually underscores their narrative and symbolic function in the film, made transparent through the confrontation with Rancho Grande's Felipe and the marriage of Eulalia with Rancho Chico's Don Rosendo. These two scenes are a culmination of Figuroa's compositional leitmotifs throughout the film that displace Cruz, the *china poblana* and José Francisco, the *charro*, the principal male and female Mexican archetypes. The doubt expressed about their status raises, but does not fully resolve, fundamental questions on the nature of identity and place. Who belongs in Mexico? Who is Mexico? Indeed, what is Mexico?

### ***Transnationalism Composed***

Opening one's eyes to visual style and one's ears to diegetic music to offer an integrated analysis of sight and sound in *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, reveals meanings in the film not previously explored. This approach, together with an acknowledgment of the transnational economic and cultural contexts surrounding the film, facilitates an appreciation of the film that goes beyond the reactionary and regressive label granted by film critics.

Critics have noted contradictions in the film, but the fundamental causes for such inconsistencies are left unexplored or are explained away in non-empirical terms that elide the transnational. The tendency by critics to approach Mexican cinema from a national perspective, rather than through an examination of the intrinsic transnational economic and cultural elements in film production, contains and suppresses the political complexity of films such as *Allá en el Rancho Grande*.

My reading of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* has endeavoured to transcend the previous socio-historical accounts that classify (and dismiss) the film as post-revolutionary, nationalist propaganda. The analysis has highlighted the

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contradictions encountered by such approaches and how they explain away these paradoxes by the use of non-empirical stereotypes, based in vague concepts such as *mexicanidad*, as discussed in Chapter Two. Through an approach that is based on visual-aural analysis within an understanding of the film's wider, transnational contexts, rifts in the nationalist agenda begin to open up. Moreover, a complex, yet more cohesive understanding of the inherent contradictions in the film and post-revolutionary ideology emerges.

It cannot be known whether de Fuentes and his co-writer Guz Águila, in choosing to structure the film on the popular, transnational form of *zarzuela*, were intending to produce a satirical comment on contemporary Mexican politics and society. Certainly, one may interpret the film as a visual and narrative parody of Mexico, a lampoon of the contradictions in its contemporary economic and social policies. In the wake of the *Campañas Nacionalistas*, the four-year campaign for national values, initiated by Ortiz Rubio and Abelardo L. Rodríguez in 1931, it may well be read as such. The Cárdenas government initially distanced itself from the overt nationalist celebration of everything Mexican that the *Campañas* introduced. However, adoption of the *china poblana* and the *charro* as central to national character, 'nuestro *charro* exhibe todo lo bueno y todo lo malo que llevamos dentro [...] anima nuestra vida y forma nuestra Patria' (Pérez Montfort, 1994: 128), was, by the time of the expropriation of the oil companies, adopted. Indeed, the *charro* and *china poblana* became central to the nationalisation programme's propaganda machine (Perez Montfort, 1994: 128-130).

De Fuentes chose to take the *charro* and *china poblana* stereotypes and develop them as the romantic central couple, José Francisco and Cruz. Figueroa, in close collaboration with the director, challenges their function as representatives of national character. In so doing, he presents Mexico as displaced and threatened, not by only by foreign intervention, but by internal conflict. Transnational emasculation and national discord is accentuated by the secondary roles of *el gringo* Pete, with his bombastic support of Felipe and private enterprise and the caricatures of the drunken, weak-willed communist,

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Florencio and the Spanish, wheeler-dealer-cum-bar owner, Venancio. Moreover, the use of these characters indicates a highly stylised, satirical undercurrent running through the film. Certainly, de Fuentes and Figueroa would have been aware of the paradoxes in the Cárdenas regime's policies - of the apparent contradiction between, on one hand, socialist rhetoric, the expropriation of key industries and radical land re-distribution and, on the other hand, the encouragement of private, transnational enterprise with its consequent consolidation of established social hierarchies.

Whether consciously satirical or not, what the film acknowledges is that contradictions emerge as a result of transnational relations. These provoke complex and challenging issues to a nation. In the film, displacement of the nation's iconic image of itself, represented in the sequences analysed above through the *china poblana*/Guadalupe Cruz and the *charro* José Francisco, brings about questions in relation to Mexican identity. I would suggest that, through the visual style and its close working with the music and lyrics, the overt '*mexicanidad*' of the film itself proposes profound challenges to the very stereotypes it employs. It highlights the use of nationalist archetypes from a transnational view. It manipulates nostalgia and the past to present a parody of itself.

De Fuentes and Figueroa were sophisticated filmmakers and in the case of Figueroa, politically active. With their experience of the US, their privileged status in Mexican society and their contacts with the entrepreneurial class who financed their films, they would have been acutely aware of the presence of transnational economic links in Mexico and their importance in the establishment and future development of the embryonic film industry. It is important to remember that the film was not hugely successful in the home territory and that it aimed itself unequivocally at an international market. Its employment of Argentinian and Hollywood star, Tito Guizar, de Fuentes's background in the US and Figueroa's training in Hollywood all informed the film's production and subsequent marketing. When viewed from such a perspective, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* transcends its reputation and becomes a

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complex exposition of contradictions in nationalist rhetoric and imagery that result from transnational relations. What *Allá en el Rancho Grande* recognises was that despite nationalist rhetoric, whether socialist or conservative, Mexico was inherently transnational.

In the following chapter, I investigate how Figueroa's representation of the rural space, so central to the *comedia ranchera* genre, developed and how, within the context of transnationalism, his rural images communicate complex issues around race, class and national identity.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Figueroa and the Rural Space**

La naturaleza de Figueroa es una hermosa orquídea, sí, pero esa flor es carnívora y habría que enumerar miles de miradas turbias, vidriosas, espantadas, arrinconadas, enternecidas, fatales, ciegas, azarosas, asesinas y voluntariosas en el arte de Figueroa para darnos cuenta de la calidad de ese terror y fascinación ante lo que se mira y lo que se quiere crear al mirarlo por temor de que si dejamos de mirarlo, siga existiendo con nosotros y, si continuamos mirándolo, nos recupere, nos abrace mortalmente, nos reintegre al mundo de la naturaleza mexicana tan inmediata, tan recientemente vencida por la piedra y el jardín, por la mano de afuera y el papel sobredado.

(Carlos Fuentes, 1988: 29)

The meticulous visual management of the fictional rural space in Figueroa's images reflects the wider complexities of class, race and identity fundamental to the expression of identity in Mexico at the time he worked on the films. His cinematic construction of the country exposed the contradictions in ideology and politics that arose from post-revolutionary nationalist perceptions of the land and its inhabitants as fundamental to national identity. As a result, although Figueroa's images inform vernacular notions of national identity, they

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simultaneously exposed the fragile basis of its construction. Consequently, Figueroa's images communicate the paradoxical relationship between Mexicans, the government and rural space as one of constant vacillation between, on the one hand, control of the country and inclusion of its people and, on the other, fear of the land and alienation of its indigenous population.

This chapter examines the contexts in which Figueroa constructed his rural images and a visual analysis of *Río Escondido* (Emilio Fernandez, 1948) demonstrates how Figueroa's images express the politics of space and the dominant position of the white Creole in the rural environment. I go on to investigate Figueroa's representation of the Indian in *Ánimas Trujano* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1961) as an expression of the use of Indian culture in the construction of national identity. Through a close look at how Figueroa positions the Indian characters in relation to the Creole in the rural space, I suggest how his cinematography exposes fundamental paradoxes in the construction of national identity that are a result of race and class hierarchies in Mexican society.

### **Rural Contexts**

Hay que decir que el creador de mis imágenes fue la naturaleza misma.

Gabriel Figueroa<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In her incisive essay on peasant politics during the Mexican revolution, Mary Kay Vaughan (1999) provides an overview of how historians, geographers and anthropologists have employed the concept of space in their studies of Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Their work covers a range of perceptions of how the Spanish colonisers and indigenous population used space; the way in which groups invested political and symbolic meaning into space; the physical occupation of space in relation to race, and also how space has been closely related to identity and expressions of power.

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As cinematography is precisely the control and creation of space through choice of lens, camera position and light, it follows that Figueroa's work, by definition, expresses cultural notions of class, race, power and identity. As a consequence, the Mexican rural space Figueroa created for the screen was imbued with social and political meaning. As a result, the images Figueroa crafted informed the perception of Mexico by national and international audiences as they absorbed and accepted Figueroa's rural Mexico as the real Mexico, or at least the Mexico that could and should have been (Fuentes, 1988: 28-29; Monsivaís, 1988: 63).<sup>xxxiv</sup> The centrality of Figueroa's work in the formation of Mexico's image and identity positions it as the benchmark for cinematic images of nation throughout the twentieth century.

One member of the audience who was strongly affected by Figueroa's Mexican landscapes was the writer, Carlos Fuentes. In an exquisitely poetic homage to the cinematographer, *Una flor carnívora*, Fuentes articulates the intricate relationship between Mexican society and the land that Figueroa's images convey. Fuentes first experienced the cinematographer's work in Argentina and his recollection of the encounter is significant. He writes that *Flor silvestre* (Fernández, 1943) had an alarming and brutal impact on him and relates how Figueroa's portrait of rural Mexico was at once beautiful, violent and exotic (Fuentes, 1988: 28). Fuentes points out the artificiality of Figueroa's images and concludes that although Figueroa did not invent the landscape of Mexico, he did transform it.

Figueroa produced the majority of his rural images in the 1940s and 1950s, a period during which there was a huge increase in the already steady flow of migrants from the country to the cities. Indeed, between 1940 and 1970 the population of the metropolitan area of Mexico City increased by 424% (Davis, 1994: 329).<sup>xxxiv</sup> This was in large part due to changes in agrarian policy and the decisive move towards urban development during the period. Successive presidential regimes quickly reversed the Cárdenas government's shift away from the remaining landowning elites and *hacienda* systems and Ávila

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Camacho and Alemán both passed bills to reform Article 27 of the 1917 constitution that was the basis of land reform.

Briefly, the Article stated that the Mexican state, as representative of the Mexican people, owned all Mexican territory (both above and below ground). Therefore, embedded in Article 27 was the notion that ownership of place (Mexico) was connected to official notions of identity (being Mexican). Significantly, the changes to the bill privileged large agricultural businesses through exemptions to the land ownership clauses in the Article, whilst they simultaneously penalised the small, farming cooperatives of the *ejidos colectivos*. Consequently, from the mid-1940s and throughout the 1950s, vast tracts of Mexican territory reverted to large-scale agribusinesses, similar to those of the Porfirian *haciendas*, as a powerful elite claimed increasing amounts of land, forcing the small, communal farmers out of the market through large-scale agricultural and industrial competition (Niblo, 1999:183-188).

As a result, the changes in land reform that were fundamental to the Mexican revolution were eroded by the drive towards a capitalist system and an urban, consumer society. However, the films of the period reinforced the intrinsic link between popular identity and the land as fundamental to national identity. Consequently, investigation of the cinematic landscape reveals an ideology formed within a paradox between the economic and social reality of the Mexican rural space and the imagined reality of Mexican national identity.

It was in this context that Figueroa produced some of his most iconic images. The visual rural space he created extended beyond a physical location of the films' narratives. His landscapes were more than images of the Mexican territory, they were spaces in which the social and political complexities inherent in notions of land, nation and self were played out. Aurelio de los Reyes has noted the geographical eclecticism of Figueroa's landscapes and has argued that the use of diverse locations that range from desert to rainforest, in films whose stories were actually based in only one place, was designed solely



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to appeal to international audiences and homesick Mexicans who had emigrated to the United States (de los Reyes, 1987: 162). However, the apparent lack of geographical and cultural specificity in the films is more convoluted than the post-revolutionary regimes' attempts to unify a disparate nation, or indeed, to produce a glossy advertisement for foreign investment and tourism, as suggested by de los Reyes.<sup>xxxiv</sup> I would suggest that the geographical ambiguity of Figueroa's landscapes actually reflects the ongoing transformation of the national territory due to the state's ambivalent approach to land management and ownership.

Given the political and social context of the films, Fuentes's suggestion that Figueroa's creation of Mexican rural space became embedded in national memory as a lost but not forgotten Mexico is certainly compelling. However, I would go further than Fuentes and argue that the Mexico Figueroa created for the big screen was not a lost bucolic idyll. His images were not memories of a way of life and landscape consumed by capitalist progress. The Mexico seen through Figueroa's lens was not a remembered land because it had never physically existed. Rather than reconstruct actual Mexican topography, Figueroa used technology to manipulate the geographic place (the actual, physical location) to present a notional (the wider geographic, social and political dimensions that surround place), as opposed to an actual space. Therefore, the imaginary rural image that emerged through Figueroa's lens was as complex and contradictory as the political, economic and social contexts in which the films were produced.

Figueroa's landscapes vacillate between a celebration of idyllic, natural beauty and a vision of dangerous, unpredictable wilderness, populated by noble, beautiful Indians (who are, nevertheless, silent and motionless) or an angry, faceless mob.<sup>xxxiv</sup> On one hand, the rural space is beautiful and bountiful and Mexico is seen as a nation that encompasses many cultures and traditions which stretch over a vast terrain with potential to provide for the nation through agriculture and natural resources. On the other hand, it is an unstable space, physically difficult to navigate and control and inhabited by a population

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with a history of rebellion against the central authority of the state, or communities led by self-governing *caciques*, who control the local population by intimidation and force.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As a result, there is an underlying sense of unease and fear present in Figueroa's representation of the rural space. As I discuss in the close analysis below, the exaggerated darkness of the sky, produced with the use of red filters and manipulation of the negative in the laboratory, together with the extreme angles, emphasise the dominance of the natural topography to produce a fragility in the characters that are dwarfed in frame.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The juxtaposition of heavy shadow in contrast to bright sunlight produces a profound chiaroscuro effect, which in addition to texture and depth, gives a sense of duality and duplicity in the image.

The fear that Figueroa's landscapes communicate was, and indeed remains, a concrete reality that springs from a long history of armed uprising in rural areas.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Fuentes sums up the relationship of nature and history when he states, 'La naturaleza es el sitio de la historia y la historia es el sitio de la violencia' (Fuentes 1988: 35). Indeed, the very title of his essay *Una flor carnívora* highlights the ambiguous relationship between beauty, fear and danger conveyed in Figueroa's rural spaces. Consequently, a paradoxical engagement with the Mexican landscape and its inhabitants emerges as a complex interaction between nature and history that expresses both fear and longing.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Figueroa produced a large body of work on rural subjects. To give an extensive analysis of his visual construction of the rural space, in the context of the multiple issues that relate to land in Mexico would be a book in itself. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on two films whose narrative themes stem from contemporary policies on rural regeneration and to explore them in relation to issues of race and class. I examine how Figueroa constructs the visual dynamic between the Creole characters in *Río Escondido* (Emilio Fernández, 1949) and rural space and go on to analyse how this relationship undermines the political rhetoric of the script and Miguel Alemán regime's attitude to rural education. In the discussion of *Ánimas Trujano* (Ismael

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Rodríguez, 1961) that follows, I discuss the Creole in relation to the Indian and how Figueroa's images express issues of power, race and class in the rural environment which both informed and were informed by a complex and contradictory construction of national identity.

### **Conceptualising Space: Written Interpretations of Place**

The perception of land/space and its role in society has created a substantial body of writing from a wide range of writers.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, discussion of the rural space in film has been curiously limited. Film critics examine landscape predominantly in relation to the western and the road movie, in which it plays a central role. Yet, despite its centrality to these genres, there is a lack of engagement with the actual visual construction of the rural space and how it functions. There is a strange anomaly that although the narratives in both the western and the road movie take place in states as far afield as Montana, Wisconsin and Kansas, the majority of films in both genres have been shot in Arizona, Utah, California, New Mexico, Colorado and north-west Mexico. A further paradox is that although Texas is the main location for the majority of film narratives, producers have rarely chosen to shoot in Texan locations (Buscombe, 1998: 120).<sup>xxxiv</sup> This suggests that although the narratives are geographically specific, as is evident in titles such as *The Santa Fe Trail* (Michael Curtiz, 1940), *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, 1939), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (John Ford, 1939), *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1958), *Ride the High Country* (Sam Peckinpah, 1962), *The Far Country* (Anthony Mann, 1954) *High Plains Drifter* (Clint Eastwood, 1972), *Horizons West* (Bud Boetticher, 1952), *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1947) and *Silverado* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1985) the landscape against which those narratives are set is imagined and highly constructed.

Because of this geographically imagined western space and the inherent links in the genre to Mexico, it is revealing to note the difference in the role and use of the West in US films in contrast to Figueroa's visual construction of rural Mexico. Ed Buscombe, a film scholar who has written widely on the western, states that landscape is:

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[N]ever, or never for long, an object merely of contemplation. Narrative is all. In a film, landscape becomes scenery in another, theatrical sense, a backdrop against which the action is played. In the western, that action frequently takes the form of a journey, landscape then becomes an obstacle which has to be overcome. Its beauty is incidental to its function as a test of the protagonists' characters. [...T]he conquest of terrain is emblematic of the achievement of the individual in overcoming personal trials and is analogous to the wider victory of capital subjugating nature.

(Buscombe, 1998: 127)

Buscombe's summary is emblematic of how film scholars have discussed landscape primarily as a background element that supports narrative development. Clive Bush goes further to describe the western landscape as suspended 'between being and nothingness' (Bush, 1996: 167). He goes on:

The 'West' was technically perceived where the human eye never was. Stubborn detail, generalized effects, symbolic routes through symbolic terrain, the 'shot' of a landscape which always represented another landscape together with the camera which always lied are the essence of the landscape of the western.

(Bush, 1993: 168)

Therefore, Bush argues, the construction of the western landscape has been a necessary part of US nationalism, with the representation of the West providing a large, abstract, empty space against which frontier themes are played out. In other words, landscape is a blank screen onto which are projected the ideological and political themes played out in the western film's narrative.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In the introduction to the special edition of *Screen* dedicated to space/place and the city (*Screen*, Autumn 1999), film scholar, Karen Lury and professor of geography, Doreen Massey, examine the study of space and place in film

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studies. Their conversation is a useful overview of how landscape has been discussed beyond the western and the multi-disciplinary work that has developed. However, their arguments also reveal significant gaps in the methodologies and theories used to examine space and place in cinema.

Massey rightly draws attention to the common yoking of space and place with the urban, an elision that suppresses and excludes consideration of other spaces such as the rural landscape. This she attributes to the close historical and social link between the growth of cinema and the modern urban experience.

Consequently, this has led to a much larger concentration of study and analysis on the urban landscape in cinema, to the almost complete exclusion of the rural (Massey & Lury, 1999: 230).<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, despite Lury's passing reference to framing and *mise-en-scène*, there is no acknowledgment of the central role cinematography plays in the construction of space and place in the film image (Lury, 1999: 232-233).

The lack of engagement with visual style is indicative of the disregard of the actual construction of the image (the cinematography) in critical studies of space and place in film. Discussion of landscape in film has been predominantly rooted in methodologies that privilege narrative and elide detailed analysis of the cinematographic construction of space/place on the screen.

The absence of analysis on the cinematographic construction of rural landscapes is significant when one considers the importance of location and space as central to theories of *mise-en-scène*. To be sure, this is not to say that *mise-en-scène* critics have not discussed landscape, but rather that their discussion of it has been brief, with little analysis of the visual style that shapes its representation.<sup>xxxiv</sup> I would suggest that this lack of engagement with the cinematographic landscape occurs because although landscape, and especially the urban environment, is acknowledged, the visual construction of landscape has to date not been submitted to in-depth analysis, even in the genres of the western and road movie, where it is central to the film's meaning.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This is

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an issue that cinematographer James Wong Howe identified in the 1940s and his comment still resonates today:

The trouble with many critics and ex-critics is that for all their skillful talk they don't understand the techniques of motion pictures. They still criticize movies from the viewpoint of the stage. This results in any number of false appraisals, but the one which I am concerned here [sic] is that this approach leaves out the cameraman entirely

(Wong Howe, 1945: 419)

There are, however, notable exceptions to this paradoxical tendency to not see the visual in discussion of space in film. In his exploration of Paris in the films of immigrant German filmmakers, *City of Darkness, City of Light* (2004) and a related article (1999), Alastair Phillips employs close cinematographic analysis in his reading of the city and the way in which '[m]ise-en-scène does more than serve an empty formalistic argument, it also works to distinguish space (and light) in gendered terms, and thus it separates not just bodies but ways of seeing the city' (Phillips, 1999: 271). Phillips's analysis opens up how visual style communicates the characters' relationships, not only to each other but also to Paris, through cinematographic manipulation of space in the framing, movement and lighting and how the visual relationship with the city informs and develops our understanding of character development. Moreover, Phillips goes on to situate visual style in relation to production contexts and to cinematic, artistic and cultural representation, to provide a holistic reading of selected films.

Phillips's relation of the city landscape to gender is paralleled in Julianne Pidduck's notion of a rural 'topographical lens', that considers how the gaze intersects with historical and contemporary discourses of class and colonialism through audiovisual language in television adaptations of Jane Austen novels. Her article examines space and the gaze, in relation to gender, class and colonialism, specifically interior/exterior/female/male placement and desire (Pidduck: 1998).<sup>xxxiv</sup> In contrast to Bush and Buscombe's view of the western

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landscape as a blank backdrop or narrative obstacle course for the main protagonist, Pidduck and Phillips highlight the complex construction of the landscape in relation to central themes of the films or television adaptations they discuss. Although there are limitations in their paradigms in relation to my own work on Figueroa, their full acknowledgement and use of the visual construction of space provides a useful starting point for reading the role and function of the Mexican cinematographer's construction of rural space.

### **Figueroa and Race/Class Topography**

In Mexican film, the gender issues on which Pidduck centres her argument are subsumed within the wider contexts of class and race. Whereas Pidduck is concerned with the relationship between space, location and gender in the English rural idyll, I shall use close analysis of Figueroa's visual style to examine the relationship of power, space, class and race within the rural Mexican landscape.

Unlike the gender/space disparities identified by Pidduck in British cinematic landscapes, in Figueroa's work male and female characters are, generally, spatially equal within the frame. The radical distinction between characters occurs in their placement and movement according to their racial and social position in relation to each other and the environment. Therefore, I adapt the space/gender dynamic identified and examined by Pidduck to an analysis of space/race/class dynamic in Figueroa's images.

There are compelling issues that arise in relation to Figueroa and the visual construction of gender. Moreover, given the historical dominance of male cinematographers and the dearth of female directors of photography in the film industry, analysis of cinematographic constructions of gender is a significant absence in film studies. However, whilst I acknowledge that such analysis is long overdue, I am also aware that there is a notable lack of *any* critical study of cinematography. My focus in this book, therefore, is to establish an approach to the construction of the cinematographic image, which will then provide the foundation for more specific studies of cinematography in relation

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to, for example, gender. It is also important to acknowledge that the class and race of a character affect Figueroa's representation of gender. Therefore, an evaluation of space/race/class is fundamental to analysis of gender in his work.

Given this intricate relation of gender with class and race, it is significant that Creoles, the white, ruling class, both female and male, are in positions of power, as the rural, landowning class in Figueroa's films that also inhabit the city. The Indians, both female and male, on the other hand, are the peons and are rarely represented in the urban space. However, female and male Mestizos inhabit both spaces. In the rural space they are the property-owning bourgeoisie, in the urban environment they are the proletariat. There are, nevertheless, a few exceptions. The María Félix character, Rosaura, in *Río Escondido* is a Mestiza/Creole teacher who finds herself transplanted to the desert. However, exceptions like Rosaura prove the rule, in that entrance to a space not associated with their social and racial position leads to the character's demise (in Rosaura's case her death) and/or reinforces their social and racial place. The analysis becomes even more complex when one considers that Creole, Mestizo and Indian characters are all played by Creole or Mestizo actors. What develops, therefore, is a complicated conundrum of space and race whereby Mestizos/Creoles inhabit the urban, but also the rural landscape as Mestizos/Creoles masked as Indians.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

*Río Escondido* and *Ánimas Trujano* are key examples of how Figueroa constructed space in relation to contemporary social policies and political rhetoric on rural issues and how race, class and power functioned in provincial Mexico. Distinct from the Hollywood treatment of landscape as a dramatic backdrop, the function of which is to challenge and prove the protagonists' characters (Buscombe, 1998: 127), Figueroa transfigured the natural geography of Mexico into an artificial, highly visible presence. Fuentes defines this presence as the *flor carnívora*, a lyrical expression of the complex relationship between the beauty of the Mexican land and the perceived, unknowable threat of the rural environment. Figueroa's images situate the characters within this geographic and social dialectic, to create a dynamic relationship between



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individuals and the space around them. The land is not an empty terrain to be overcome and ultimately possessed as in the western, nor a scenic backdrop to political themes as in the road movie; rather, Figueroa's landscape interacts with the characters in the films. The dynamic he creates between space and the individual exposes the internal conflicts in the characters and the political complexities in the films' narratives and production contexts. As a result, he reveals the multifaceted social order of Mexico through relationships of dominance and powerlessness, both in the characters' relationship to landscape and to each other. Through camera position and the play between the contrast, light and texture of the image, Figueroa exposes positions of power and impotence that reflect the race/class hierarchy of Mexican society.

***Espacios virtuales: The Wide Closed Spaces of Río Escondido***

Figueroa no depende de una imposible 'estética nacional' sino de la aidez visual que reconoce fuerza artística en donde sólo se admitía la sucesión convencional de escenarios. Más que ningún otro camarógrafo, Figueroa amplía territorios y presenta lo ocultado por el uso reverencial de la tradición.

(Monsiváis, 1988: 65-66)

*Río Escondido* was a triumph for Figueroa, for which he won his sixth international award for best cinematography at the Karlovy Vary film festival and gained his third consecutive Ariel in Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The didactic and rhetorical script written by Fernández and Mauricio Magdaleno, together with the active participation and support of the government, has led many film scholars to cite the film as an example of the nationalist style of filmmaking they perceive as synonymous with the work of Figueroa and director Fernández.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The melodramatic narrative of *Río Escondido* is overlaid with nationalist declarations. When Rosaura opens the school she gives a speech on the Indian president, Benito Juárez, denounces oppressive *caciques* like Regino and

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lectures on the importance of justice and education as the way forward for the Mexican state. However, despite the overt nationalistic zeal of the film, I agree with historian Seth Fein that reading *Río Escondido* as nationalist is problematic (Fein, 1999).

Fein's research reveals underlying economic and political transnational links that challenge the accepted view of *Río Escondido* as a nationalist production. According to Fein (1999: 125-128), the film's themes supported the cultural project of an authoritarian Mexican state, which had a strong commitment to 'alliance with U.S. foreign policy and transnational capital.' Where I would diverge from Fein's argument however, is his proposal that a cinematic 'idiom' was created, 'that concealed both the depth of the Mexican industry's transnationalisation and the broader structures that linked the government's project (not to mention the nation's development) to its northern neighbor, upon whose political support it depended' (Fein, 1999: 123-124). The basis of this national film language, Fein argues, was the visual style of the films. Hence, if Fein's analysis is followed through, Figueroa's cinematography functions to camouflage and distract attention from the intimate transnational production links and the wider political and economic contact zones so fundamental to the Mexican government and the ruling elite.

Whilst I agree that *Río Escondido* is neither ideologically nor industrially opposed to the United States, I would challenge Fein's assumption that the film's visual style follows the classical Hollywood paradigm and that it conceals the transnational relations between the Mexico and the US. However, this is not to suggest that Figueroa's work is an example of the oppositional aesthetics proposed by Ramírez Berg in his nationalist formulation of the 'Figueroa-Fernández style', in which, as we have seen, he establishes a cinematic aesthetic of *lo mexicano* in opposition to Hollywood (Ramírez Berg, 1992 and 1994). Rather, I suggest, that on close analysis of Figueroa's work in *Río Escondido*, inconsistencies emerge that disrupt the Mexican government's agenda. Internal contradictions evident in the visual style of the film produce an unease that subtly undermines the script's central political message: that

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education is the way to bring the perceived primitivism of rural society into line with the progressive Mexican state.

The changes to Article 27 introduced by the Ávila Camacho and Alemán regimes to facilitate the growth of industrialised agriculture and to limit cooperative small-scale farming was indicative of the drive to bring traditional rural communities into line with the capitalist, liberal economic policies that were encouraged by transnational partnerships. However, rather than conceal these ideological and economic links with the US, as Fein suggests, Figueroa's images work to expose the complex consequences of transnationalism. The subtle, ever-present ambiguity between the bucolic and the threatening in the landscapes and the characters' relationship to it and each other, functions to unsettle the narrative and reveal the deep fissures in the nationalist rhetoric that are symptomatic of transnationalism.

*Río Escondido* opens with an inter-title that tells the audience that the following story is a chronicle of courage and of good overcoming evil. It also states that the themes are universal and therefore the film is not specific to contemporary Mexico. Paradoxically, this opening title cuts to general views of the Zócalo (main square) of Mexico City. An ethereal choir sings the lyric 'México, México', as a male voice underlines, over shots of the national flag, the cathedral and the national palace, that this is the symbolic centre of power in Mexico. The sequence cuts to the interior of the palace to Rosaura Salazar, a young teacher, as she ascends the main staircase surrounded by Diego Rivera's murals and their leftist, idealised depiction of Mexican history. In a scene with President Miguel Alemán, who makes a significant cameo appearance that underscores the production's apparent allegiance to dominant political ideology, the President gives Rosaura a posting to the remote northern village of Río Escondido. As she hurries away to catch her train, the President says to his aide 'Esa niña es la Patria'.

Alemán's statement is central to the film. It establishes Rosaura/Félix as the personification of the motherland and as such she becomes a representative of a

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modern, democratic Mexico, dedicated to progress through education.<sup>xxxiv</sup> As such, she enters the rural space in order to bring a feudal, illiterate, pre-industrial society into line with the progressive capitalism of modern Mexico. As the motherland, Rosaura/Félix is both educator and reformer and her relationship with the indigenous population of the village is one of parent/child and embodies the patronising attitude of central government towards the non-urban population. The irony of this zealously nationalist opening can only be fully appreciated when seen in the context of its production.

Throughout the post-war period, Hollywood and the US State Department repeatedly defeated attempts by Mexican producers to develop the film industry. The brief and questionable collaboration between the Mexican and US industries during World War Two had metamorphosed into subtle control of Mexican products by Hollywood.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The structure of the national industry, with exhibition, production and distribution functioning independently did not help the situation as the disparate factions lacked a systematic network of mutual economic support. Moreover, national exhibition had been for some time, paradoxically, under transnational control. In addition to the turbulent series of post-war threats and concessions identified by Fein, which were a result of the assimilation process to re-assert US hegemony in the film industry during the late 1940s, a more insidious and consistent transnational link is apparent.

Through his political and personal contacts, William Jenkins, the former US Vice Consul in Puebla throughout the 1930s and 1940s, had steadily formed a national monopoly on film exhibition that had important repercussions for the box office profits of Mexican films. Jenkins had been a principal stockholder in the original Banco Cinematográfico and was a key mover in the Nacional Financiera, the official credit agency on which film production depended. When the Banco Cinematográfico was reorganized into the Banco Nacional Cinematográfico, with the stated aim to limit private controls and monopolies in the industry through finance provided by the state, in conjunction with Banco de México and Banco Nacional de México, the other partner brought in

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was Nacional Financiera, in which Jenkins had substantial holdings (Mora, 1982: 76-78). Jenkins's subsequent partnership with entrepreneur Emilio Azcárraga, whose links, as discussed in Chapter Two, to the major US broadcasters and studios dated back to the late 1930s, reinforced transnational alliances between the ruling Mexican classes and their counterparts in the United States. These allegiances were compounded by transnational political and financial coalitions in other areas of the growing Mexican economy. Simply put, if the US-born Jenkins did not agree to exhibit a film it did not make money. *Río Escondido* was produced, therefore, in a period of political and economic re-negotiation, during which the US and Mexican governments, businesses and individuals on both sides of the border wrestled for control. Hence, the definition of *Río Escondido* (in common with other films in the Fernández Figueroa partnership) as part of nationalist project has to be questioned and not only in terms of its contexts.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Figueroa's personal experience during and after the war mirrored the transnational dealings of industry and government. However, given that he was under Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) surveillance for over thirty years, his position was ambiguous. Set in this context, it is not surprising that tensions become apparent early on in *Río Escondido*. As the train pulls away, leaving Rosaura at her destination, Figueroa shoots her from a low-angle, medium close-up, against a dark, cloud-filled sky. As she turns to walk away into the strong wind, the camera pans to the left, revealing a vast, arid plain. The frame is adjusted with a slight tilt up to reposition the horizon mid-frame. Rosaura descends from the railway to the plain. Immediately, Figueroa's framing situates her in relation to the landscape. Rosaura's previous dominance of the frame changes radically as she walks away from camera. She becomes increasingly smaller, lost in the immense wilderness. The rain-like percussion on the soundtrack conveys the aridity and lifelessness of the deserted plain. Figueroa created the sense of limitless expanse and the ominous sky through the use of a 24mm, wide-angle lens to exaggerate perspective and worked with a complex manipulation of filters, film

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stock and aperture to exploit a full range of black and white tones, that showed the deepest black and the brightest white, yet kept the full range of greys.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

As Rosaura walks across the salt plain, a tiny dot in the immense solitude, she and the audience enter a different world, a timeless space, where the heightened tragedy of the film is to be enacted. The wide angles, dutch tilts and downward movement in composition and camera, reflect the inaccessibility of the landscape and the rural situation that the young, urban teacher is entering. The small, remote, ruined town of Río Escondido adds to the sense of hopelessness. It is a lost place, hidden from, yet situated within Mexico by the opening scenes of the film.

Figueroa's use of wide lenses and a composition that sets the horizon low down in frame, particularly in the opening scenes of the film, create a curvilinear perspective.<sup>xxxiv</sup> *Río Escondido* is a good example of how Figueroa used perspective to create an atmosphere and tone that undermines the heavy-handed, progressive rhetoric in the film's dialogue. Whereas in traditional linear perspective, the eye is usually taken to the foreground figure(s) to give a sense of human control of the landscape, in Figueroa's frame the figures are incidental to a geography that engulfs and dominates the frame.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The wide angle and camera placement suggest, as do Atl's paintings, a different relationship to the Mexican landscape that cannot be expressed through conventional representation. This suggests a distinct appreciation by Figueroa (and Atl) that the rural environment was too historically, politically and socially complex to be articulated in rectilinear perspective.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Figueroa's composition resonates with Atl's concept of *espacio virtual* in which the space beyond the plane of observation is recognized and acknowledged in relation to the *espacio real*, the space within visual range of the observer (Atl, 1934: 61). As Rosaura struggles across the open, desert plains, the horizon is framed lower and lower until it disappears completely and Rosaura is seen isolated, balanced on the bottom of frame against the sky, a small, distant figure.

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The sequence then cuts to an acute angle of a hill that bisects the frame, concealing the horizon altogether. Rosaura collapses (we have been told in the opening scene that she has a heart condition). When the doctor Felipe Navarro (Fernando Fernández) discovers and revives her in the following scene, Figueroa's framing becomes increasingly abstract and expressionist. The land disappears and the cloud-filled sky is the only part of the environment visible. The action framed in dutch tilts and oblique composition, culminates with movements down and a pan that follows the sharp downward line of the diagonal horizon to dissolve through to a pan-tilt down to the tunnel-like entrance to Río Escondido.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The visual structure of abstract composition and perspective set against a wide sky disturbs the audience's conventional relationship to space. In so doing, Figueroa creates an ambiguity between the virtual and the real space of the film, which, in turn, generates a tension between the official rhetoric of national progress through education and health care inherent in Rosaura's and Felipe's dialogue and the stark visual portrait of the rural space and its people. Through Figueroa's lens the governmental policy of regeneration and progress of rural Mexico appears not just superficial, but futile.

The image of the stark, brutal landscape and community as beyond the understanding and, therefore, control of central government was not accidental. Figueroa developed new ways of working with filters and film stock for *Río Escondido*. He had investigated da Vinci's theories on the colour and texture of the atmosphere and the atmospheric particles that created a 'haze' between the painter and his subject (de Orellana, 1988: 39).<sup>xxxiv</sup> Figueroa discovered that with an infra-red filter he was able to eliminate the smog he saw between the camera and the subject to give a clearer image.<sup>xxxiv</sup> He then combined slightly lighter reds with green filters to attain the required intensity of contrast in ratio to the mid-greys in the image. The make-up and clothing of the actors was consequently adjusted to keep within the tonal range, as reds, for example, would register as whites (Figueroa Flores, 2002, Dey, 1995: 42). He then

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combined this use of filters with a technique that underexposed the film and adjusted it by pushing (over-exposing) the stock when it was developed in the laboratory (Figueroa Flores: 2002). The result created the impression of a three-dimensional image through depth of field and tonal texture. It created what Figueroa described as the 'Mexican landscape in balanced forms, chiaroscuros, half-toned skies and the kind of immense clouds that we all fear' (Dey, 1995: 42).

In *Río Escondido*, the modern forces of progress cannot penetrate the land or fight against ignorance and oppression encountered in the rural space. *La patria*/Rosaura struggles across the arid wastes and ultimately dies in the desolate village. The film's overt message, that government initiatives in education and health are progressive forces through which to unite the nation, is rendered insignificant in the barren streets of Río Escondido and the brutally stark landscape that lies beneath Figueroa's fearful, rainless clouds.

### **The Domain of the Criollo**

In his insightful analysis of racial ideology in Mexico, Lomnitz Adler (1992) reveals the complexities of this class-race dynamic that became manifest in a complicated caste system that was not based purely on colour, but on political and economic strategies as well. He argues that the Spaniards' retention and use of certain hierarchical aspects of Indian society worked to benefit the dominant Spanish hegemony, which is why later the use of Indian culture was to be central to the formation of Mexican nationalism. (Lomnitz Adler 1992: 262-265). Although, in theory, *castas* were abandoned at Independence and replaced by the concept of *mestizaje*, whiteness was still seen as something that guaranteed status. The term Indian simultaneously became associated with backwardness, dirt, poverty and disease rather than a racial category, hence dark skinned, poorer Mestizos were also categorised as Indian. Indeed, the concept that whiteness was somehow more 'civilized' was so embedded in society that Justo Sierra declared that Europeans were needed 'so as to obtain a cross with the Indigenous race, for only European blood can keep the level of



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civilization from sinking, which would mean regression not evolution' (Knight, 1990: 78). Consequently, the change from caste to class still kept the Indian at the bottom of the social hierarchy and the European at the top. Even after the revolution, despite the reappraisal of the Indian and the revalorisation of the Indian past through *indigenismo*, the growing aspirations of the state to bring itself in line with the United States and Europe paradoxically led to the notion to 'mejorar la raza'. This was an impulse to self-improvement only seen as possible if one would 'blanquearse', literally whiten oneself (Lomnitz Adler, 1992: 278).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Figuroa's representation of rural space and the characters in *Río Escondido* serves as an effective demonstration of the dynamic between class and race that Lomnitz discusses. In the film *Rosaura*, the representative of *la patria* and the Mexican state's rural policies is, significantly, a Creole. Although presented as poor Mestiza, it is María Félix, a white Creole actress, who plays the character. Figuroa's control of the film stock exaggerates her whiteness against the darker skin tones of the villagers with whom she works. In scenes with the village community, he frames Rosaura in either an oppositional relationship to the Indian residents or as central and dominant in frame. In shots with village women, he positions Rosaura on one side of shot and the women on the other. Ramírez Berg argues that in so doing, Figuroa breaks the diagonal lines in the frame, representative of class and ethnic divisions to unite Rosaura with the oppressed (1994: 22). However, in the majority of shots Rosaura is framed on an oppositional diagonal, usually top-left frame, above the other figure in bottom right of shot. Her gaze directs the viewer's eye in a downward diagonal to the other figure. The illuminated whiteness and smooth texture of her skin contrasts dramatically with the darkness and rough complexions of the women, dressed in their black *rebozos*. Although presented as sympathetic to and compassionate with the poor, the ethnic hierarchy remains intact with the Creole *patria*, physically placed above the Indians. Despite the framing and action that unite the characters, the relationship between Rosaura and the anonymous village women and children is patriarchal rather than equal. *La*

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*patria* patronises the community and reinforces, rather than disrupts, the strict social hierarchy.

The figure of Regino Sandoval, the Creole *cacique* (Carlos López Moctezuma) further strengthens the maintenance of the racial and social status quo. On the rare occasions that Figueroa frames Regino in shot with the villagers, he is in a dominant position, mounted on a horse or shot from a low-angle. Although he shares few sequences with the villagers, he has many scenes with Rosaura. In their first, violent encounter Regino dominates Rosaura in frame. Rosaura is isolated and shot from high-angles, Regino from low-angles against the empty village and with his henchmen in the background. This visual relationship develops and changes through the film until the climax of the film where Rosaura and Regino's positions reverse. When Rosaura finally shoots Regino she stands over him, dominant in frame.

The visual relationship Figueroa establishes between Rosaura and Regino is, therefore, quite distinct from their visual representation in relation to the village community. What results is a spatial and narrative struggle for power between two Creoles. On the one hand, is Rosaura/*la patria*, progressive, compassionate and socially aware; on the other, is Regino, reactionary, cruel and oppressive. Both characters are united by Figueroa's visual presentation whereas the silent inhabitants of Río Escondido remain equally patronised whether by regressive or progressive forces. Spatially and visually, power clearly remains the domain of the Creole.

The demise of Rosaura, the symbol of the modern Mexican state, in a rural environment populated by visible but mute Indians (played by non-professional Indian extras) and dominated by a cruel, Creole *cacique* and his Mestizo henchmen, proposes issues concerning race, class and power in relation to the rural space that are present in other films Figueroa shot. Race, class and power are central themes in *María Candelaria* (1943), *La perla* (1945), *Pueblerina*

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(1948) and *La rebelión de los colgados* (1954) all directed by Emilio Fernández, and in *El rebozo de Soledad* (1952) and *Macario* (1959), directed by Roberto Gavaldón. But it is in *Ánimas Trujano*, directed by Ismael Rodríguez in 1961, that landscape, space and social place sharply define the main character of the film, *Ánimas Trujano*, the Oaxacan Indian who wants to become 'un hombre importante'.

### **Positions of Power in *Ánimas Trujano* (*Un hombre importante*)**

Whereas in *Río Escondido* the Indians are a silent backdrop to a power struggle between Creoles, in *Ánimas Trujano* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1961) they are the central characters. Figueroa's representation of the Indians in the film reveals a notion of 'good' and 'bad' Indians that demonstrates the hegemonic practices of the Creole/Mestizo majority that contain and thereby control the Indian minority.

The discussion that follows of *Ánimas Trujano* examines the power positions of the characters within the rural space, specifically Oaxaca, through an analysis of the visual dialectics Figueroa constructs in the film. To understand the basis on which such a system of dialectic is built, I shall first give a brief overview of how ethnicity and race form the basis of a Mexican national identity that promotes racial unity under the banner of *Mestizaje* whilst simultaneously maintaining a race/class elite.

### **The Indian, *lo mexicano* and Identity**

In an enlightened essay, Enrique Florescano points to the distinct historical discourses of the pre-Hispanic age and the viceroyalty that defined the basis for subsequent constructions of national identity. Florescano argues that the absolute control the pre-colonial rulers had over the interpretation and dissemination of history fragmented with Spanish colonization. In its enforced creation of larger political units, the governing elite of New Spain divided the established territory of diverse tribal groups. Consequently, the cohesion of the

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distinct aboriginal communities that constituted the Mexica empire fractured. The viceroyalty 'came to be a disintegrated mosaic of contrasting peoples, ethnic groups, languages and cultures, disseminated in an extensive territory with poor communication'. As a result of this 'primordial disintegration' there was a distinct shift in processes of memory and time. The consequence was a construction of hybrid historical discourses and identities that came about from multiple social realities (Florescano, 1994: 184-185).<sup>xxxiv</sup> As the aboriginal Indian by definition was connected to land and consequently with notions of its ownership, the pre-colonial past and its people became fundamental to constructions of a cohesive national identity that were central to maintaining the power of the governing elite.

As discussed above, Both Lomnitz Adler and Knight address the complex results of the multiple social, cultural and racial realities that Florescano defines. Both argue that the inherent racism of the colonial caste system persisted through the independence period, the revolution and into the present. Consequently, *indigenismo*, the lionisation of pre-hispanic and Indian culture that was an attempt, on the part of successive nationalist discourses, to construct a unified national identity based on the indigenous past, was imbued with racism, which often appeared in the form of reverse racism and an unhelpful idealisation of all things Indian (Knight, 1990: 87-92).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Both Lomnitz Adler and Knight highlight the fundamental paradoxes that arise between post-revolutionary *indigenismo* in relation to *mestizaje* due to the persistent presence of race and class hierarchies in Mexico. Ultimately, the deployment of *indigenismo* subsumes multiple ethnicities and cultures into a homogeneous mass that seeks to integrate the Indian into Mestizo society and in so doing, 'liberate the country from the deadweight of its native past' (Brading, 1988: 85). As Knight lucidly concludes, Indians, 'are discriminated against for being Indian and at the same time admired for being the "real soul" of Mexico, living proof of Mexico's noble, pre-hispanic heritage'. (Knight, 1990: 101).

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*Ánimas Trujano* is a clear demonstration of the contradiction in nationalist discourse which, on the one hand lionises Indian heritage and situates it as central to Mexican identity and on the other hand locates it as 'other'. Indeed, the film exemplifies the conundrum, so cogently acknowledged by Lomnitz Adler and Knight, in its characterisation of 'good' Indians who are compliant to and contained by the Mestizo state and 'bad' Indians who persist in their traditional practices and beliefs and, therefore, have the potential to undermine the hegemony of *Mestizaje*.

### **Oaxaca as 'Other'**

As mentioned earlier, rural space is fundamental to nationalist discourse and inherent in the notion of *indigenismo*. The action of *Ánimas Trujano* is emphatically located in the state of Oaxaca, a physical space that represents the national 'other'.

In the opening, pre-credit sequence of the film, a globe turns in space to stop with the American continent facing the viewer, followed by a zoom into Mexico's Oaxaca region. Consistent with the film's intention to reach an international audience, the state of Oaxaca is located for the viewer who may not be aware of its location, whilst the shot simultaneously situates Oaxaca in a global context.

To a Mexican viewer, the state of Oaxaca evokes a distinct and contradictory image of a large Indian population, rich in aboriginal cultures but rife with poverty. It is a place of economic underdevelopment and hunger that is the site of a beautiful and overwhelming landscape of *sierra* and forest, yet inhospitable and difficult to exploit. Oaxaca is seen as the motherland of pre-Hispanic culture (the archaeological sites of Monte Albán and Mitla predate Tenochtitlán) but nevertheless, is perceived as a cultural backwater, reactionary and opposed to progress. The region has several native languages/dialects,

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including Mixtec and Zapotec, but they are minority languages in a country where Spanish is the dominant idiom of politics and culture. Shamanism and magic rooted in ancient religions and traditional healing are inherently linked to spiritual practices, yet the state is also seen as a centre of *brujería*, superstitious belief and dangerous medical procedures. In short, the Oaxaca of *Ánimas Trujano* represents the indigenous heritage of Mexico, which, as Knight so cogently expresses, is embraced as fundamental to the country's self-identity and simultaneously rejected as regressive and threatening. Consequently, Oaxaca, where the cultural, social and political contradictions that form modern Mexico are unequivocally visible, is a complex cinematic space for a Mexican film.

### **'Good' and 'Bad' Indians**

Within this space lives *Ánimas Trujano* (Toshiro Mifune); a lazy, violent drunkard who exploits his wife and family, challenges authority, is imprisoned and released only to squander his wife Juana's (Columba Domínguez) hard-earned savings on gambling and a prostitute. He sells his grandson and spends the money on fulfilling his ambition to become *mayordomo* of the village.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, the community realise how he has suddenly come into the money and reject him. The long suffering Juana kills Catalina (Flor Silvestre) the prostitute. Filled with remorse at his past actions, *Ánimas* assumes responsibility for the murder and surrenders himself.

Although not based on an actual story or events, the use of documentary form at the beginning of the film lends the subsequent fictional narrative a historical and anthropological authority and opens up the reading of the film on two levels, as a fictional narrative and as a social documentary. The opening voice-over suggests to the viewer that, although *Ánimas* is a fictional character, his 'type' exists and thereby sets up an explicit distinction between 'good' Indians and 'bad' Indians that is at play throughout the film. The narrator stakes a claim on the villagers as being 'nuestros indios'. The commentary locates Indian culture as 'living artifacts in a museum' whom an undefined 'we',

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(presumably the nation), must care for and maintain. The narration makes the viewer complicit with a notion of benign patronage for 'nuestros indios', the 'good' Indians, whom 'we' own and Indians such as Ánimas, whom we must repress and contain.

Throughout the film, Juana and Tadeo (Antonio Aguilar) represent the good Indians; they are industrious, respectful and submissive to authority and the status quo. Ánimas is, potentially, a subversive character, who questions the authority of the ruling elite, the structure of his own community and their subservience. However, typed as a bad Indian, constantly weakened by his drunkenness and internal bitterness, any radical element that his character could inject into the film is denied. At no point in the narrative is his anger redirected to effect personal and social change. The priest, in naming Ánimas *mayordomo*, believes he can instill some sense of duty and responsibility in his character and make him a good Indian – Catholic, God-fearing, humble and diligent; in a word, containable.

Having established Ánimas as a type, Rodríguez develops the narrative through and with his character. Through Ánimas we encounter many of the situations that are central causes to his anti-social and violent behaviour. However, unlike his contemporary, Glauber Rocha, in Brazil, Rodríguez does not distance his characters enough to demonstrate to the audience the cause and effect of social and political climates upon them. In contrast to Manuel in *Deus o Diabolo na terra do sol* (Rocha, 1964), Ánimas's transformation is not a political act.<sup>xxxiv</sup> At no point does Rodríguez make the link between Ánimas's actions and character and the environment that has made him how he is. His macho behaviour is a compensation for the deep insecurity he feels. His need for constant attention and praise stems from the powerlessness that is the reality of his life. The narrative, however, never examines the roots of Ánimas's disempowered existence. Therefore, the rebellious acts that he commits have no political direction and, finally, become self-destructive.

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## The Visual Dialectic of Good and Bad Indians

Figueroa's formation of a visual dialectic is founded on the oppositions of 'good' and 'bad' Indians. Figueroa's cinematography in *Ánimas Trujano* uses the spatial relationships between characters and place within shots to set up a visual language that underscores the inherent ideology of the film. He positions characters systematically within the following visual and structural oppositions:

High-angle	Low-angle
Light	Dark
White	Black
Luminosity	Shadow
Foreground	Background
Top of frame	Bottom of frame

But what is significant in the film is that Figueroa uses elements of this dialectic in two ways. First, to express the characters' social relationships with each other and second, to establish characters' social and racial positions to the rural space they occupy.

Central to the creation of the visual dialectic in the film is Figueroa's decision to shoot *Ánimas Trujano* on Cinemascope. Cinemascope creates an image that includes twice the horizontal field whilst the vertical field remains unaltered. When projected, the image is twice the usual width on the cinema screen with an aspect ratio of 1:2.66. This affected the composition of shots. The strong, diagonal compositions that Figueroa had used to great effect in other films were difficult to achieve on this ratio, especially as it required the use of lenses with a short focal range. The aesthetic advantage of cinemascope was that it gave the possibility of bi-lateral symmetry, that is a composition that took advantage of the width to set each side of the frame in a visual relationship with the other. In other words, instead of a composition in depth, it had a greater range of choices for a composition in width. Figueroa used Cinemascope to set up a system of visual dialectics in *Ánimas Trujano* that worked on the distance between the characters and the space they inhabit in



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frame. He also had greater freedom to light each side of the frame to express the different characteristics of the emotional subtext of scenes.

Figueroa immediately establishes the visual dialectic in the film during the opening scene of the baby's death. *Ánimas* is framed at eye level, mainly in mid-shot and medium close-up. Figueroa's composition and lighting isolate *Ánimas* from the domestic space. A tilt-pan connects the other children to the baby as it lies dying, yet the move right to left to *Ánimas* conveys the emotional distance between the children and their father and situates him outside of the domestic arena. Juana enters from long shot to join *Ánimas* in frame and establishes her role as family mediator and her predominant, physical position in relation to *Ánimas*. Whilst he sits slumped on the floor, drinking in the shadows, Juana stands over him, her paler face lit with a soft key that gives her a luminance in contrast to the dark, hard lines on *Ánimas*'s face. *Ánimas* denies her pleas to fetch the doctor and he physically restrains her. However, his position provokes a feeling of impotence in his macho gesture and behaviour. He commands Juana, yet she is dominant in frame. Her position establishes an ambiguity within their relationship that is evident throughout the film.

The *velación* scene which follows, foreshadows the imminent fall of *Ánimas*. Physically wrestled to the ground by Tadeo, the camera looks down onto *Ánimas* as he swears revenge. *Ánimas* snatches a machete and demands that Tadeo fight. But his threat is rejected and he stands dark against shadowy surroundings, isolated and rejected, while Tadeo is lit full face, linking him to Juana as a good Indian by the luminous quality of his face. The community is shown en masse in the following shot, clearly lit and looking out of frame towards *Ánimas* in the shadows. As a result, Figueroa establishes the key visual relationships in the first five minutes that he develops throughout the film.

Although *Ánimas* inhabits the same fictional landscape as the other characters, as the film progresses, Figueroa creates a separate visual space for him through

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the use of hard-key lighting, usually placed at a 60-degree angle to the side of Ánimas. The lighting creates shadows that emphasise the lines and texture of Ánimas's face. Figueroa builds on this lighting motif and it culminates in the *gallo de oro* scene. Moreover, Ánimas is often framed alone, outside and isolated from those around him. Figueroa constantly frames him in the bottom-half of frame, usually on the ground, either lying or squatting. In contrast, Juana is seen lying down only once, in the scene in which Ánimas, rejected by the prostitute Catalina, brutally takes out his frustration on his wife.

In the scene in which Juana suggests that the family go to work for the local *mezcal* producer, she finds Ánimas lying on his back under a tree. She kneels over him as she talks. He becomes irritated, rises and walks up the slope. He aggressively confronts Pedro (Pepe Romay), his son, growling '¿Qué me ves? Ya, sé qué estas pensando...' [sic] and hits him. As he turns to say that they will all go to work, Figueroa shoots him from a low-angle and frames him in opposition to the family. Positioned under a dead tree, the dark tones of Ánimas's skin match the darkness of the branches that are juxtaposed against the empty white sky. By contrast, Figueroa creates a balanced composition for the family with a leafy tree in the background. The position and lighting on Ánimas implies his isolation, distanced from his family, within a barren, personal space. Figueroa highlights the paler skin tones of Juana and the children and adds depth to the composition through a grey/black/white scale, which connects them through the depth of the frame to the space they inhabit. Ánimas's physical elevation from low-angle is, however, short-lived and he suddenly slumps down to the ground. The barren tree looms ominously behind him. Figueroa thus conveys Ánimas's character and relationship to his family through an extension of the film's visual dialectic:

<i>Ánimas</i>	<i>Juana/Family</i>
High-key lighting	Soft-fill lighting
Shadow and darkness	Sunlight
Dark skin tones	Paler skin tones
High-angles down	Low-angles up

Figueroa's subsequent treatment of the scenes with the Creole *hacendado* extend the play on visual contrasts in construction of the image and expose the complex hierarchy of the Creole/Mestizo/Indian cultures and their position within space and landscape. The scenes are the most complex in terms of Rodríguez's direction and Figueroa's cinematography. It is during these sequences that Ánimas is pictured at his lowest. Juana is positioned above him, on a level with the *hacendado* (Eduardo Fajardo) and a cooperative relationship is established between the Indian woman and her Creole boss, who is, significantly, a *mezcal* producer, the very drink that is Ánimas's weakness.

Figueroa consistently frames the *hacendado* in positions of dominance. Our introduction to him is on a horse, a visual reference to the first *conquistadores*. He is dressed in white, with a white hat, smoking a cigar. Figueroa frames him just off-centre, the workers gaze up at him. The whiteness of his clothes and skin, in conjunction with a short depth of field, distance him from the background landscape. With his choice of lens, Figueroa at once separates the *hacendado* from the land and the Indians that work for him, yet maintains his dominance of the space and the frame.

At the weighing house, Figueroa frames the *hacendado* and Juana in a low angle up to the platform on which they both stand. Ánimas enters below and says to the Creole, 'Arriba ó abajo es del mismo tamaño'. But the comment goes nowhere. Juana and the Creole stand together on the platform looking down on him. The reverse shot of Ánimas is high-angle down and he shares the frame with a donkey. Throughout the scenes in which Ánimas and the *hacendado* feature, the camera is placed predominantly in low-angle, shooting up to the Creole and high-angle down towards Ánimas. Figueroa further emphasises the inequality of their relationship with lighting that has a consistently diffuse, luminous quality on the white skin and clothing of the Creole, whilst Ánimas is lit by a high key that throws hard shadows onto his face.

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Juana's positioning with the *hacendado* and her share of the frame is notable. It unites the two in their view of Ánimas. Juana, with her submissive and diligent attitude impresses the *mezcalero*. She is a good Indian, yet despite the acknowledgement he affords her, it does not stop him calling her 'una india ladina' when she begs him to sign a petition to release Ánimas. The visual, triangular relationship of Ánimas/Juana/*hacendado*, that is bad Indian/good Indian/Creole, and their position within the filmic and metaphorical space created by Figueroa, culminates in the scene in which the *hacendado* comes to claim the baby fathered by his son, Belarmino (Juan Carlos Pulido) in a brief affair with Ánimas's daughter, Dorotea (Titina Romay). It is significant that the shared grandson of Ánimas, Juana and the *hacendado* is the embodiment of *Mestizaje*. Further, when Juana and Ánimas surrender custody of the baby to the Creole, it is on the understanding that he will have a 'decent' upbringing which, it is inherently implied, his Indian grandparents cannot give.

Significantly in a previous scene in which Ánimas, unexpectedly released early from jail, finds the money in the hut, beats Juana, Figueroa employs expressionistic techniques to shoot the scene. He uses a top shot, through the roof to show the fall of Juana. The preceding scenes, which demonstrate Juana's strength and resourcefulness in Ánimas's absence, are brutally transformed into the darkness of his return. The expressionistic lighting of the hut transforms the sunny day into darkness and foreshadows Ánimas's violent assertion of power. However, in distancing the viewer so high above the scene, Figueroa also makes Ánimas a victim. The shot exposes the disempowered Juana and Ánimas, both visually trapped by the acute angle and framing.

By contrast, the subsequent baby-selling scene places Juana once more in a dominant position. She stands, while Ánimas sits. The *hacendado* arrives and walks straight into the hut, neither asking permission, nor signalling his arrival. Ánimas grabs his machete. The Creole reassures Ánimas that he has money for him. Figueroa structures the sequence around a long shot, with the Creole and Juana on the left-hand side of frame and Ánimas on the right, a two-shot

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medium close-up of the *hacendado* and Juana and a medium close-up of Ánimas, opposite to Juana and the *hacendado* with Pedro in focus in the background, looking on.

A baby's cry from outside draws attention to the wet nurse in the carriage. Figueroa's use of depth of field and a tonal range that changes from the darker, more textural interior of the hut to the bright, flat, exterior establishes two planes of action and two parallel realities. On the one hand, the interior Indian space of the hut and on the other, the exterior Creole/Mestizo space. The *hacendado* crosses frame to Ánimas, breaking away from Juana and enters into a medium close-up with Ánimas. The Creole dominates the frame and, with a low-angle, Figueroa accentuates his height above Ánimas and his pervasive presence within the Indian space. He demands that the couple give up the baby. The visual and narrative relationship established between the *hacendado* and Juana is broken and she appears isolated with the baby in the corner of the hut. For the first and only time in the film, Ánimas and the *hacendado* are united in the frame and in their attitude as they both attempt to coerce Juana into surrendering the baby. Finally, Ánimas crosses the frame in long shot and demands that Juana obey him. Juana, however, is finally convinced by the *hacendado*'s comments that the baby will grow up in poverty, uneducated like her other children, with Ánimas as a role model if it stays. With her surrender, she accepts that all he says is true. In so doing, Juana acknowledges the racist structure of a society, in which illiteracy and poverty can only be overcome by submission to or collaboration with the Creole rural hegemony. Her grandson will have to *blanquearse* in order to progress.

The *hacendado* and the family move outside. Figueroa frames the carriage and the horses so that they dominate the landscape. The size of the Mestiza nurse takes up most of the low-angle frame. Her political, cultural position as half-Indian, half-Spanish, is literally acted out as Ánimas and the Creole both push her up into the carriage. The two cultures heave under the ever-growing weight of *mestizaje*. Her milk, abundant enough to feed two, is given to the baby and she disdainfully rejects Juana's offer of the bottle of goat's milk. Her

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'Hmmmph!' expresses her contempt, accentuating the message that Mestizo, progressive Mexico is the superior society of abundant milk and money. Juana refuses the Creole's departing offer of cash, but Ánimas greedily snatches the notes as the *hacendado* and wet-nurse wave down to the family in a foreshortened high-angle. As the carriage leaves in long shot, Figueroa tracks the camera back into the hut to frame the Creole's departure through the window, with the empty cot swinging in the foreground.

Figueroa's visual presentation of the film's two main characters may be read as an attempt to accentuate the strengths of Juana and the weakness of Ánimas. Their visual presentation would suggest this. Yet, ultimately, Juana accepts and demonstrates a subservient role. Rodríguez explains this in the narrative as Ánimas's salvation being through Juana's love for him. If one interprets Rodríguez's intention in the narrative to show Juana's love for Ánimas and its ability to transform him as being the most powerful force in the film, Juana is granted the place of heroine in the film. However, one is left at the end of the film with a sense of unease. Although Ánimas achieves a form of transcendence, by the end of the narrative, Juana remains unchanged. Juana is, in the final analysis, stoic, supportive and suffering. She is the catalyst of personal transformation for the male, yet the possibility that she could transcend her role is not contemplated.

Paradoxically, Figueroa's framing and lighting of Juana, particularly in relationship with the Creole *hacendado*, denies her any possibility to transcend the dominant racial, economic and social hierarchies. The potential for transcendence of her role is signified by her position in frame and within the luminance of the Creole spaces. Yet, this ultimately reflects a contradiction in her role between passive support of the dominant social hegemony, represented by the *hacendado* and the dynamic provider for her family.

*Ánimas Trujano* could have been a socially critical film. It could have exposed how the Spanish colonialism that engulfed Mexico transformed into a social

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hierarchy based on race that continued to structure Mexican society despite independence and the revolution. However, the narrative and Figueroa's visual style create ambiguity, rather than critique. Juana, Tadeo and the villagers inhabit a space of luminous light and harmonious framing, in the style of the most incandescent and dominant in frame, the Creole. The visual and spatial links between the good Indian and the Creole and the birth of Dorotea and Belarmino's baby suggest that the union of the two races, Creole and Indian, to create *Mestizaje* is both positive and progressive.

By contrast, the space Figueroa creates around Ánimas is dark, shadow-filled, moonlit, a space of superstition and deceit. It is the 'other' Oaxaca. It is a potentially subversive space that must be undermined and kept low in frame, a landscape to be examined from a high-angle but not entered. Yet, ultimately, despite the apparent visual and narrative union of the good Indian with the Creole, the Creole remains subtly dominant in frame, more luminous, more powerful. The final shot of him high up the carriage handing the money down to Ánimas and the track back into the dark, empty hut undermines any suggestion of change. As in *Río Escondido*, the Creole remains firmly at the centre of the social and political frame.

Consequently, Ánimas's final words as he runs across the ruins of Monte Albán, 'Usted no sabe como es la carcel', become metaphorical. As he sobs his fear to his *compadre* he is talking of his own personal prison, built from his own cowardice and insecurities. But his words could also be interpreted as the words of the Others that Ánimas represents, those bad Indians, imprisoned in their social position, locked into their poverty, isolated in a space that is made other, by the hegemonic control of the Creole/Mestizo culture.

### **Compromised Dialectics and Absent Analysis**

Close attention to the cinematography in *Ánimas Trujano* and *Río Escondido* reveals tensions between the construction of the rural space and the ideology within the films' narratives. In *Río Escondido*, the didactic rhetoric of the new progressive Mexico is undermined by the stark, expressionistic creation of an

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unchangeable, overwhelming rural environment. In *Ánimas Trujano*, the potentially progressive visual dialectic that expresses the complex social relationships between Creole, Indian and Mestizo is made redundant by reactionary stereotyping of good and bad Indians, in good and bad situations, under the patriarchal control of the white Creole. As a result, the narrative compromises the social critique that might be read into Figueroa's visual rendition of race and class.

It is important to remember that Figueroa's stated aim in every film he worked on was to communicate the director's and writer's vision to his best ability. Further, although he never discussed his cinematography in terms of politics, I would agree with Carlos Monsivaís that Figueroa elaborated on what the spaces and characters suggested to him (Monsivaís, 1988: 66). Hence, despite his lack of overt acknowledgement of the politics inherent in his work, on close analysis, Figueroa's cinematography is clear evidence of the inconsistencies present in the films' contemporary social, political and economic contexts.

Moreover, this chapter draws attention to the significant absence of detailed analysis of rural space in film studies. When Errol Flynn declares in *Silver River* (Raoul Walsh, 1948), 'I don't intend to blend with the landscape, I intend to fill it!', his character aptly sums up the role of landscape in the western which is to provide an empty space for the hero to fill with US notions of the frontier and individualism. Yet, despite such acknowledgement of the rural space and its importance to US national identity, in the large body of work on the western and road movie, there is no study of its cinematographic construction. The work of scholars such as Pidduck and Phillips suggests fresh paradigms with which to appraise the currently neglected work of the cinematographer. Yet, in Mexican film scholarship, as in US western film analysis, to date there has been no previous detailed analysis of landscape, despite its central role in the national imagination of Mexico.

*Río Escondido* and *Ánimas Trujano* are just two examples of how, through close analysis of Figueroa's cinematography, the inherent class, race and power



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structures present in late 1940s and early 1960s Mexico are revealed. The analysis of these films points to areas for future study of space over a wider range of films by Figueroa and other filmmakers. What has emerged in this overview is that Figueroa's cinematographic construction of the rural space exposed contradictions in the social and political ideologies contemporary to the films. The fissures that the countless frames reveal, paradoxically provided space for the deep roots of Figueroa's carnivorous flower to bloom in the collective memory of Mexico.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Figueroa's City**

El asfalto y la noche fueron espacios de miedos inexorables y tragedias lúgubres; imágenes que pusieron en crisis a esa naciente modernidad, al espacio urbano codificado en sus intensos contrastes primarios (visuales, dramáticos, morales).

(Coria, 1997: 52)

In its five-hundred year history, the city we know as Mexico developed from 'la región más transparente' (Reyes: 1917; Fuentes: 1958) to what Davis has called the 'urban leviathan' (1994). The twentieth century heralded a period of unprecedented change in the Mexican capital. The 1900s opened with the overthrow of Porfirio Díaz, a subsequent revolution, followed in the 1950s by unparalleled urban development that continued until the end of the millennium. The shift towards state-sponsored modernity that caused the capital's rapid growth is closely linked with the development of Mexican cinema and one of its leading figures, Figueroa. An examination of Figueroa's cinematography, therefore, reveals fundamental issues that arose from the uneasy relationship between Mexican nationalist ideology and the complex experience of

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modernity that came to a head in the fifteen years between the late 1940s and early 1960s. During this period, Figueroa created urban spaces that are sites of transition. The louche, subterranean nightclubs and the cramped *azotea* rooms (traditionally used to house servants and labourers) transform into the loci of socio-psychological drama as stairways and hallways become conduits between higher and lower social, political and moral levels.

The drive to modernity, so essential to successive political regimes in the post-war period, not only affected the physical appearance and experience of the city, but also provoked changes in the urban population.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Most significant was the way in which the role of women radically altered during the period of rapid expansion from the mid-1940s onwards. From the post-war period onwards film narratives were increasingly located in urban environments and the main characters in the melodramas and *cabareteras* (a inherently urban genre) that dominated Mexican screens, were women. Consequently, Figueroa's images of female characters in the city space expose issues around modernity that emerge together with disjunctions and contradictions that the Mexican urban space provoked. Close analysis of the seminal *cabaretera* film *Salon México* (Emilio Fernández, 1948) and the lesser known, but equally significant, melodrama, *Días de otoño* (Roberto Gavaldón, 1962) reveals how the cinematography in both films positions women in relation to the modern city space and how fissures in the image of motherhood, a key trope of national identity, are subsequently exposed.

### **Constructing Mexico**

Mexico City is a multi-layered site. Historical events and physical construction are intimately interwoven into the very fabric of the city's spaces. Since the early fourteenth century, structures have been built on top of the remains of older edifices and subsequently remodelled into the hidden, but ever present, foundations of the new.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Aztecs planned the city they named Tenochtitlán as a three-dimensional representation of their quadripartite universe, with a ritual centre at its heart; a city where reality and myth interacted (Matos Moctezuma, 2002: 48-49). The role of Tenochtitlán as a

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microcosm of the universe and its place as central to empire was reinforced after the conquest when the Spanish conquistadors renamed it Mexico, a name that came to represent not only the city but also the country of which it was to be the capital. Consequently, from its inception, the development of Mexico City related intrinsically to a notion of nation. Mexico City was Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In the same way that the city grew from layer upon layer of *tezontle*, stone and wood, the history of the capital and the nation was consistently deconstructed and rewritten. Just as the Aztecs appropriated and hid existing remains to build Tenochtitlán, and in the process construct their own history, the Spanish destroyed and recycled the Aztec centre to build the colonial capital and rewrite Mexico's story once more. Subsequently, as the metropolitan space grew and transformed during the colonial, baroque, Porfirian and post-revolution periods, the architecture and design of the city came to embody the politics and social outlook of the governing regime.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The reconstruction of Tenochtitlán into Mexico City was a transnational, transchronological recycling operation. Materials from the pyramids and temples were re-used, together with imported rock and marble to construct a colonial capital. The result of this juncture of transnational labour and design was a synthesis of European styles that adapted and changed with the new materials, the topography of the Valley of Mexico and the spiritual beliefs and psychology of the indigenous labour.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Consequently, the creation of Mexico City was a mixture of aboriginal and imported building styles, materials and methods brought together by diverse spiritual and political beliefs. With the exception of a few plans and maps, there are few representations of the city from the early colonial period. I would suggest that the burgeoning city expressed its own self image in a constant expansion and transformation of art, architecture, politics and economics. Throughout the colonial period and the significant shifts brought about by independence, war and revolution, the city/nation was in a constant state of changing definition. Elements of its former self provided the foundations of both edifices and written histories. As a result, the city transformed from a microcosm of the

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universe into the epitome of nation. Mexico the city became analogous to Mexico the nation.

Figuroa's images are as self-consciously constructed as the city itself. The metropolitan space on film does not correspond to the actuality of place but is built from the combined interpretation of Figuroa and the different directors and production designers with whom he worked. From the script to screen they remodelled the city, not only on location, but recreated it in the city's studios.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Many of Figuroa's urban films start with wide establishing shots or general views of the city. The Zócalo features in several of his films including the two that I examine in this chapter.<sup>xxxiv</sup> These general views usually start with a high angle, followed by a slow pan right to left across the Zócalo, sweeping over the Palacio Nacional, with the volcanoes, Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, in the background of the frame. The pan ends to frame the cathedral on the left, the Palacio Nacional taking up the rest of shot. This wide establishing shot is then intercut with a variety of long shots of the Palacio, the Cathedral and the national flag. The shots resemble travelogue panoramas and could be placed at the beginning of any Mexico City-based narrative. However, what makes them significant is that they situate the Palacio Nacional and the Cathedral as dominant in the Mexican space. Consequently, the shots locate the narratives firmly in relation to the two aspects of social, moral and political power in Mexico that the physical buildings represent, the State and the Catholic Church.

The other locations used in the films do not necessarily correspond to the actual or authentic sites of the narratives, but those that best convey the meaning of the scenes to be shot. These were sought out and evaluated by Figuroa, together with the director and production designer. The final choices evolved from a combination of production and aesthetic decisions. Location shoots included interior as well as exterior scenes and usually a large amount

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of set construction and decoration was necessary to achieve the desired atmosphere and historical or social detail.

Alternatively, studio sets were constructed for both interior and exterior scenes. The choice to construct in the studio was made from a combination of economic, practical and artistic factors. Following on from his mentor Gregg Toland's example, Figueroa worked closely with the production designer in the planning and construction of the sets both on location and in the studio (Gerszo: 1991). Toland had shadows painted in on sets, perspectives altered by the size of props and room construction to achieve the visual quality required for the scene, as well as working around the practicalities that the lighting rig and camera movement required (Toland, 1941: 54-55). Figueroa took many of these ideas and incorporated them into his own work (Figueroa Flores: 2000).

What the production process of choosing, remodelling and shooting film locations and sets in studio reconstructions clearly demonstrates is that Figueroa's Mexico City, both inside and out, is a complex manipulation and literal construction of space. Most importantly, in addition to the choices and development of the metropolitan filmic space, it is vital to take into account that the underlying political commitment to modernity that informed the construction of this space provoked complex and often contradictory results in relation to post-revolutionary nationalist ideology.

### **Mexico and Modernity**

Throughout the twentieth century, Mexico City's unprecedented growth was a result of the country's political history. Its steady expansion during the early 1900s accelerated as the post-revolutionary political interest and economic investment in rural and agrarian reform gave way, in the 1940s, to large-scale, urban development. By 1960, the capital accounted for over 46% of national industrial growth. With the steady influx of immigrants from the rural areas to find work in the burgeoning industrial sector, the population boomed. Mexico City became the national centre for consumption and expansion. To accommodate the enormous growth in population and industry, the space the

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city occupied in the Valley of Mexico expanded from 9.1 square kilometres in the early 1900s to 1,500 square kilometres at the beginning of the twenty-first century (García Canclini, 2000: 208-209).

The breakneck speed of twentieth-century expansion in the Mexican urban space, in particular Mexico City, was closely bound to post-war concepts of progress and modernity. Notwithstanding the ideals of autonomy and self-determination that modernity and nationalism have in common, modernity's erosion of tradition and community was in direct conflict with nationalism's ideal of social cohesion (van Delden, 1998: 9). The result in Mexico was a conflict between the progressive, transnational imperative of modernity and nationalism's agenda of *indigenismo* and *mestizaje* that was persistently promoted to form the foundation of post-revolutionary identity. Or as Lomnitz Adler concludes, '[I]mages of national culture often emerge out of a sense of nostalgia for that which modernization destroys' and 'these nostalgic images can serve to justify a holistic, anti-democratic ideology that has been embodied in the post-revolutionary Mexican state' (Lomnitz Adler, 1992: 254).

The conflict between the political and economic drive to modernity and post-revolutionary ideology became increasingly evident during the Alemán regime. The rift was manifested in the work of writers, artists and filmmakers as they were caught up in the on-going ambiguity between inward-looking, nostalgic nationalism and the cosmopolitanism inherent in the transnationalist, progressive agendas of subsequent post-war governments.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The endeavour to form a cohesive identity for national culture, supported by many cultural producers had, in many ways, served as an instrument to counter modernity and the emancipation that it potentially offered to a broader sector of the community by way of social and material benefits (van Delden, 1998: 9-10). By the same token, the internationalism inherent in modernity was viewed with caution as it held the potential to erode the national identity that had been methodically constructed around reclaimed indigenous culture.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The crux of the matter was that the social and economic benefits offered by modernity were offset by the threat of Euro-US economic infiltration and cultural

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influence that would compromise national sovereignty and identity. This essential ambivalence between modernity and nationalism was evident in the cultural work produced and, indeed, persisted well into the end of the twentieth century.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The constant demolition and reconstruction of the city throughout its history provoked a search for historical identity during the colonial era, post-independence and the post-revolutionary period. From the 1940s, old buildings and, indeed, entire areas of Mexico city were demolished in the cause of rapid transnational, capitalist development, central to the ruling elite's interpretation of modernity. This led to an urgent struggle to articulate and retain a sense of national identity. Yet, an obvious fact was widely overlooked. The exploration and glorification of the past and the accompanying melancholic nostalgia has been blind to the fact that Mexico City has been in a constant process of transformation since its founding by the Mexica. As a result, Mexico City was, and continues to be, a site of intrinsic transition. Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, the drive to modernity experienced since the 1940s was part of a long heritage of continual shifts in the political, social and economic development of Mexico, city and nation. Significantly, nowhere was the acknowledgement of the transitory nature of the city more apparent than in the films of the period. The images on the screen were of a Porfirian urban space, that had grafted itself onto a colonial city and was itself providing the foundations for the new Corbusier-style architecture of the modernist regime.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Indeed, by 1947 novelist and screenwriter José Revueltas had already concluded that cinema not only projected the ongoing experience of modernity, but, indeed, embodied it (Revueltas, 1947: 2-10). Mexican filmmakers who, since the beginning of cinema, had negotiated the contradiction between the development of a national cinema within a fundamentally transnational industry, increasingly used the city as the location in which to discuss the reservations and, indeed, the underlying insecurity that the increased momentum of modernity provoked.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

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## Film and the City

The overwhelming presence of the city in Figueroa's work reflects the intimate relationship between cinema and the urban space that has been present in films since the beginning of cinema. The ubiquitous city has defined genres such as film noir and has taken a leading role in the narratives of chronologically, politically, geographically and aesthetically diverse films. Examples include *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (Walter Rutman, 1927), *Roma città aperta* (Rossellini, 1945), *Tokyo Monogatori* (Yasijuro Ozu, 1953), *New York, New York* (Martin Scorsese, 1977) and *Lisbon Story* (Wim Wenders, 1994).

Academics and critics consider the close association between film and the city to result from the simultaneous emergence of cinema with the rapid increase in urbanisation during the twentieth century.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In line with their peers in other disciplines, film scholars have drawn on a plethora of theoretical writing around the city/urban space. They have employed the work of Lefebvre and Foucault as well as other critical perspectives, from Marxist theory to feminist, poststructuralist and postmodern thought, to develop insights into the cinematic representation of city as a space and place.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Yet, despite the range of analytical paradigms and, indeed, Mexico City's status as a 'postmetropolis' (Soja, 2000: 218), there has been little work to date on the cinematic representation of Mexico's capital. The one book dedicated to Mexico City in film, David William Foster's book, *Mexico City in Contemporary Mexican Cinema* is a text that, despite its title, does not engage visually with the city to any extent. Foster's city is a scenic background, a loosely defined, homogeneous area in which he sets his reading of thirteen films produced between 1971-1999 under three section headings, 'Politics of the City', 'Human Geographies' and 'Mapping Gender' (Foster: 2002). The actual physical representation of the urban environment through close visual analysis is elided by non-cinematic, socio-historical and political analysis of the films. Despite the value of his readings, I would suggest that Foster's analysis is restricted, as he does not consider the relationship of the films'



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characters and themes in relation to the visual representation of the city. A critical consideration of how this relationship is constructed and its historical precedents would provide cinematic evidence of the themes he examines in the films and, indeed, the films' varied production contexts. Ultimately, while the title of his book suggests a critical engagement with Mexico City, the city remains under-explored, relegated to a shared, common backdrop against which the diverse narratives of the films are played out.

Although Erica Segre (2001), likewise, discusses Mexico City in her lucid article on images of displacement in Mexican cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, her use and analysis of the term cinematography is inappropriate (Segre, 2001). Segre formulates her discussion of cinema through photography and despite her inclusion of cinematographers who had started their careers as photographers (amongst whom she includes Figueroa), she applies an analytical methodology more appropriate to critical studies of photographs rather than film. In her use of José Revueltas's discussion of film images as a paradigm, her consideration of movement is purely in terms of montage.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Consequently, Segre (and indeed, Revueltas) confuse cinematography (the fundamental aspects of which are camera movement, movement within the frame, lighting and their relationship to composition) with editing. As a result, despite her enlightening conclusions, she fails to engage critically with the filmic images that are central to her discussion, ultimately viewing them as a series of photographs, not as films.

This lack of engagement with the cinematographic construction of Mexico City resonates with the absence of such analysis in relation to the Mexican rural space. To embark upon a complete analysis of Figueroa's cinematic rendition of Mexico City merits a long and complex study in its own right and is an area still ripe for further research. I shall, therefore, limit my discussion to Figueroa's cinematographic rendition of the urban space in relation to characters in two films, *Salón México* (Fernández, 1948) and *Días de otoño* (Gavaldón, 1962); specifically how the visual representation of female characters corresponds to public and private spaces in the city and how this

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relates to the notion of motherhood prevalent in the production contexts of these films.

In the discussion of Figueroa's manipulation of compositional planes, camera movement, lighting and his presentation of a specific urban space, the *azotea*, I shall explore how the city becomes a site of transformation and transgression for the women in the films. Further, I shall suggest how Figueroa's images encapsulate the ambiguity between post-revolutionary nationalist images of the mother and the changing role of women under the pressures of modernity.

### **Public and Private Places**

Significantly, both *Salón México* and *Días de otoño*, have female characters as the main protagonist. *Salón México* is about Mercedes, a cabaret hostess, who works in the nightclub to secretly support her younger sister at a private girls' school. A pimp, Paco, who uses and abuses her, controls Mercedes. Lupe, the club security guard who knows of the situation with her sister, offers to marry Mercedes so she can give up prostitution. However, when Paco threatens to reveal the truth about Mercedes to the school she shoots him and he, in turn, kills her. In *Días de otoño*, Luisa, a naïve, small-town girl, arrives in Mexico City with a letter from her recently deceased aunt. It is a letter of introduction to Don Albino, the owner of a patisserie, requesting that he give Luisa a job. This he agrees to do. It becomes quickly apparent that Luisa is a daydreamer. However, as the film develops, her daydreams transform into a neurotic psychosis in which she invents a husband and baby, whilst rejecting the possibility of a relationship with the widower Albino and his two small sons. The film concludes somewhat uneasily with Albino proposing to help Luisa and marry her. This motivates Luisa to give up her fantasy child (her husband has already 'died' in an accident) supposedly to live happily ever after with Albino.

In *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman* (1996), Joanne Hershfield presents a detailed discussion of *Salón México* in relation to the social and economic changes during the 1940s that changed the role of women in Mexican society.

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Hershfield positions the film as a *cabaretera*, a genre that, she states, foregrounds female sexuality and desire to expose the anxieties around social transformation during the 1940s. The move to modernity, Hershfield argues, made conflicting demands on women caught between the traditional roles of a nationalist discourse, 'motherhood, chastity and obedience', and the new potential for financial and social independence. She then proceeds to examine the film in the context of what she defines as a 'patriarchy in crisis' (Hershfield, 1996: 83-84).

Whilst Hershfield's analyses are compelling, her use of the Malinche/Malintzin paradigm ultimately restricts her reading of the film.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The dichotomy suggested by the Malinche stereotype does not allow for complexities beyond a Catholic-based, madonna-whore model. Moreover, although Hershfield discusses space in the films, her analysis is brief. From the general terms of public and private space, her argument, is based on socio-economic dichotomies between private/home space and public/non-domestic spaces (parks, museums, cinemas and streets) and how they represent sites of patriarchal domination and in the case of *Salón* operate to connect women to an 'imagined notion of Mexican national identity' (Hershfield 1996: 101). This analysis, although useful, does not fully account for the internal contradictions in the film that are made apparent on closer examination of the visual construction of the film's spaces. When one examines Figueroa's images of the women within the filmic space, a more complex representation emerges than that suggested by Hershfield. The complexity becomes apparent on examination of how Figueroa navigates the image in the diverse filmic topography that embodies manifold economic, social and moral meanings.

Though not immediately apparent, there are significant similarities between the spaces of *Días de otoño* and *Salón México*. Although in *Salón México*, it is a nightclub that is the predominant public place that Mercedes inhabits and for Luisa in *Días de otoño* it is a patisserie, both are spaces where commodities are exchanged. They are places where the women actively engage in the relevant commerce to earn their living; in Luisa's case it is decorating and selling cakes,

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for Mercedes it is dancing and selling her body. They are commercial sites and therefore, accessible by most urban social groups, from upper to lower classes. Both Mercedes and Luisa also inhabit a private space. Each woman lives in a room on an *azotea* (a rooftop maid's room). The rooms are a signifier of class/race, in that they are inhabited only by the lower classes, Mestizo, or indeed, the unseen but present urban Indian.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In both films, the rooms, set high above the city, are sites of transition and transgression between social and sexual roles, fantasy and reality, life and death. Connecting these public and private spaces are the transit areas of streets and stairways that the women constantly traverse.

The cinematography and narratives of both films present both the public and private spaces in ways that underline the anxiety, uncertainty, and cultural crisis provoked by modernity in Mexico during the mid-twentieth century. Certainly, Mercedes and Luisa are women in crisis. Both are women alone. They are single, orphaned (their mothers are dead and their fathers are not mentioned) and struggle to survive in Mexico City. Significantly, they both strive to replace absent mothers. Mercedes becomes her sister's surrogate mother and Luisa creates a fantasy pregnancy and baby son. In both cases, their maternal role necessitates subterfuge and deception. Mercedes assumes the image of a business woman, with long working hours and a position that takes her away from the city, to hide the fact that she earns the money to pay for her sister's school fees by prostitution. Luisa uses padding to simulate a pregnancy and creates an elaborate fantasy as a young mother until she finally deposits her imaginary son at the doors of an orphanage.

Despite the presence of potential male partners in the narratives, none of the men represents a conventional patriarch to complement the matriarchal roles the women assume. Mercedes is used and abused by the pimp Paco and although Lupe appears to potentially fulfil a supportive role, he ultimately fails. It is never clear whether Luisa's ex-fiancé, the bigamist Carlos, actually exists (he could just be part of Luisa's fantasy) and Albino's intentions appear as reticent and ambiguous as the film's ending. Figueroa's representation of the

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women in relation to the public and private spaces they inhabit expresses an inherent ambiguity that is present in both films, a tension between the matriarch and patriarch, the woman and state, that is integral to the characters of both Mercedes and Luisa and problematises the theme of modern Mexican motherhood in both films.

### **Public Space**

The primary public spaces of *Salón México* are the dancehall itself and Beatriz's school, and in *Días de otoño*, it is the patisserie. The secondary spaces in the films are recognisable city locations, namely the Zócalo and the Museo Nacional, Chapultepec park, San Juan Bautista in Coyoacán, the *viaducto* and various streets and alleys. The dancehall, school and patisserie are the places where Mercedes and Luisa interact with the other protagonists and the films' narratives develop. The secondary spaces of the Zócalo and museum in *Salón México* are central to situating Mercedes within a nationalist framework and a mother archetype and the park, roads and church in *Días de otoño* work as spaces to frame Luisa's fantasy world. However, the choice of these secondary public locations (made by Figueroa and the respective directors) and Figueroa's visual representation of the women within these spaces exposes elements in both characters that disrupt and question national images of the mother and the mother's place in relation to nationalist discourse. Indeed, the images provide compelling examples of attitudes to the female sex in the city. Hershfield's analysis of Mercedes, cited above, is convincing and provides a sound basis for approaching the function of women within the city in *cabaretera* narratives, but if one goes further and examines Mercedes in visual relation to public spaces more complex readings emerge. The same applies to close analysis of Luisa in the streets, parks and church in *Días*.

### ***Salón México***

The first shot of the film introduces the viewer to the dancehall *Salón México*. A low angle of the neon sign dominates the screen and together with the film's title, establishes its main narrative space. In the sequences that take place in the club, Figueroa works with a full range of shots, from big close-up to wide

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shot. In all set ups, Figueroa draws attention to the edge of the camera frame by framing bodies half in shot which spill out of frame to convey a sense of freedom and the spontaneity of the club setting. The action beyond the frame implies a world outside of the diegesis and, therefore, outside the viewer's viewpoint. Figueroa's framing and composition together with the multi-layered soundtrack of music, effects and dialogue, work to suggest an unseen, hidden world beyond the confines of the frame. His use of low-key lighting combined with grading of the negative in the laboratory to exploit the full range of blacks and whites, exaggerate skin tone and texture to create a sensuality in the dancers, musicians and their movements.

Distinct from these shots, which convey the exuberance and physicality of the club, Figueroa uses a tight mid-shot to introduce Mercedes and Paco. The shot contains and frames the couple. It exaggerates the disciplined moves of the *danzón* to demonstrate the control Paco exerts over Mercedes. The tight framing expresses the sexual and emotional tension between the couple and contrasts dramatically with the sense of freedom conveyed in other shots of the Salón. With the use of a key light placed high above the couple and a rotating ceiling fan, Figueroa creates intermittent shadows on the faces of Mercedes and Paco that in turn expose and hide them. The sequence at once demonstrates the liberal atmosphere and pulsating life of the Salón, the main arena for Mercedes, yet simultaneously Figueroa introduces the sense of her entrapment in the world of the club that ultimately leads to her death. The cinematography suggests a contradiction between the public space of Salón México as being a place of sensual and physical pleasure and liberation, yet simultaneously a place of restrictions and threat.

Figueroa's representation of the school space also challenges its apparent symbolic function. In the narrative the school may be seen as the antithesis to the Salón. It is a 'decent' place, an institution for girls, governed by a strict matriarchal headmistress, who extols the virtues of womanhood and maternity. The institution is evidently a private finishing school that educates and prepares young women for, one assumes, marriage and the role of mother.

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Yet, it is precisely the space where a major internal irony on motherhood is most evident. Mercedes, the heroic mother substitute manages to fund her sister's preparation for maternity and monogamy at the school by working as a prostitute. The irony is underscored by the visual construction of the school which is loaded with double meaning. The viewer always sees the school in the daylight, in direct contrast to the Sal3n, which is seen exclusively at night. Figueroa works with the light in both the exteriors and the interiors of the school to create an image that lacks the sensual delight and texture of the Sal3n and its clientele. The students of the school are all upper middle-class creole girls, whose white complexions are emphasised by full key and fill lights. Unlike the scenes in the club, Figueroa does not vary the intensity between fill and key and consequently creates a bland, flat texture that emphasises whiteness and denies sensuality. Neither is there the variety of shots that the club sequences have. Figueroa restricts the scenes mainly to long-shot, mid-shot and mid close-ups and many compositions in the school use barred windows, doorways, counters and desks to bisect the frame to divide and contain characters to suggest the oppressive and repressive milieu of the upper-class society.

The scene that introduces the headmistress of the school is an example of the way in which the narrative function of a character is defined through cinematography. Mercedes stands on one side of a long counter that stretches across frame, divided from the headmistress who stands facing her on the other side. Long, bar-like shadows created by a strong key light through the window, stretch ominously down the wall behind the headmistress and a strong shadow bisects the space between the women to divide them within the frame. The sequence intercuts from a long shot to a two-shot over the shoulder of both women. The headmistress dominates the scene throughout. In the two-shot over her shoulder towards Mercedes, she takes up two thirds of the frame, whereas in the reverse shot over Mercedes's shoulder, Mercedes barely fills one-half of frame. Conversely, in the long shot the headmistress faces camera, whilst Mercedes has her back to it. At the end of the scene, as Mercedes leaves frame, the camera pans left to finish on the headmistress in mid close-up,

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centre frame. Both the women represent motherhood in the film and Figueroa's visual treatment of them and the spaces they occupy echoes the complex attitudes to the mother and prostitution that had been at the forefront of national debate a decade earlier, the resonance of which was still felt in the post-war years.

In 1940, eight years before the film went into production, in order to distance the government from the sex industry, President Lázaro Cárdenas abolished the 1926 act that had been introduced in an attempt to control prostitution through governmental intervention. The heated discussion that had led up to the abolition was complex, but one of the central conundrums in the debate was that motherhood, a central icon of national identity and post-revolutionary ideology, applied not only to morally acceptable family women, but to what were perceived as immoral women as well. The majority of prostitutes were also mothers and it proved impossible for the government to at once condemn and criminalise those prostitutes who were forced into the sex industry in order to support their families, whilst it simultaneously relied on notions of maternal duty and sacrifice as central to Mexican society.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The narratives in films of the 1940s reflect the ambiguous attitudes to the sex industry that developed in the 1930s and that led to the eventual abolition of the 1926 regulatory act, as well as the notions of motherhood that were problematised during the process.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The complex duality and ideological hypocrisy towards prostitution and motherhood that is revealed on examination of Figueroa's cinematography is demonstrated in a sequence that follows Mercedes's meeting with the headmistress. Mercedes takes her sister (who is unaware of her profession) to the Museo Nacional, a space of national ideological repute and significance. The sisters wander around the exhibit of pre-hispanic sculpture. They stop in front of a large, Aztec stone head of Coyolxauhqui. Figueroa frames the head in low angle, so that it dominates the space between the two sisters, who stand in mid close-up, facing each other. The dominating and oppressive presence of Coyolxauhqui is significant when one considers her meaning in Mexican pre-



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hispanic myth/theology.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In the Aztec myth, the sexuality of Coatlicue, (Coyolxauhqui's mother) is celebrated and vindicated by her giving birth to the Aztec's central deity Huitzilipochtli and the destruction of her detractors, the jealous daughter Coyolxauhqui and *Los cuatrocientos*, who condemn Coatlicue because she does not know the father of the child Huitzilipochtli. Therefore, in the context of the myth, Figueroa's composition of Mercedes and Beatriz in relation to the sculpture resonates with the complex attitudes towards motherhood and female sexuality inherent in the relationship between Coyolxauhqui and her mother Coatlicue. The myth predates the Malinche/Malintzin paradigm and it is significant that Figueroa and director Fernández chose to shoot Mercedes's dialogue in front of the Coyolxauhqui and not in front of one of the many representations of Malinche/Malintzin.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Whereas in the Spanish colonial Malintzin paradigm, woman is interpreted as both traitor to her race and progenitor of *mestizaje* in a Catholic Madonna/whore duality, in the Aztec myth Coatlicue is protected and worshipped as an earth mother and is presented as a positive, life-affirming model. Consequently, in the use of a nationally significant space, the Museo Nacional, and the reference to an archetypal pre-hispanic matriarch, Figueroa and Fernández reveal a central contradiction in the society and politics contemporary to the film's production. This contradiction is the ideological dilemma of an image of the matriarch who works to fulfil her responsibility to provide for her children independent of a patriarch (Coatlicue) and an image of the mother as whore to the patriarch (Malinche/Malintzin). When one compares the visual construction of this scene with the scenes of Mercedes and the headmistress in the school and the scenes in the Salón, a contradictory message emerges. The decent and ideologically acceptable school is lacklustre and repressive. Figueroa's static compositions emphasise containment and the lighting flattens and de-textures the image. By contrast, the politically unacceptable den of iniquity, Salón México, is presented in a rich variety of compositions, textures and lighting that expresses a liberal, racially and culturally open space.

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Paradoxically, although the matriarchal headmistress inhabits the 'decent' space of Mexico, the school is restricted and confined by visual formality and ideological naïvety. On the other hand, despite Mercedes's entrapment in her relationship with Paco, her public habitat, the *Salón*, is visually and culturally diverse, sophisticated and open. Her role and function as mother-substitute is unquestioned and, indeed, supported by Lupe, the doorman of the *Salón*. What emerges is a set of contradictions, within contradictions. The school, representative of a socially and politically acceptable space, with its conventional view of women and motherhood, is ultimately repressive and reactionary. Ironically, the *Salón México* suggests alternatives to the backward-looking structures imposed by the school. However, these alternatives expose the schism created by modernity between the nationalist image of woman as mother and the reality for most women living in the city space. In *Salón México*, the only way to resolve such a fundamental ideological fissure is to kill off Mercedes. Her murder is an uneasy conclusion to a narrative that does not provide satisfactory closure.

### ***Días de otoño***

The struggle between political pragmatism, ideology and morality in *Salón México* is completely elided in *Días de otoño* by the representation of motherhood as a delusional fantasy. Released fourteen years after *Salón México*, the 1962 city space in *Días de otoño* is one of faceless traffic and hard, bright streets. The patisserie where Luisa works has none of the sensuality and excitement of Mercedes's *Salón*. Rather, it is comparable to the school, an angular space of even lighting that denies texture and depth in the frame to evoke a sterile atmosphere. The majority of compositions in the secondary public spaces of Chapultepec park, the streets and the church, San Juan Bautista are a combination of eye level, mid-shots and establishing long-shots. Figueroa chooses to maintain in these spaces the even light of the patisserie. He avoids shadows and the print appears to be slightly over-exposed to mute detail and add to the flatness of the image. Unlike *Salón México*, where the cinematographic space alternates between the sensuality of the salon and the sterility of the school, in *Días de otoño* Figueroa maintains a consistent, even,

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slightly diffuse light whether in exterior street scenes or interiors of the patisserie. His handling of the public spaces evokes a repressive, barren atmosphere and captures the alienation of the rural Luisa within the urban space.

In the patisserie, Luisa, the naïve, provincial girl is presented in direct contrast to Rita, the streetwise city woman. Luisa, dark-haired, small and sombrelly dressed is the visual antithesis of Rita, with her peroxide hair, tight-fitting clothes and high heels. Rita is presented as the archetypal modern woman. She has a job, is independent and has a range of lovers. However, in the last quarter of the film she confesses to Luisa that all she really wants is to settle down, marry and become a mother. Ironically, her desire to convert her life to the traditional role of wife and mother is provoked by her admiration of Luisa's marriage and motherhood which, unawares to Rita, are her friend's delusional fantasy. Consequently, the film literally sets up an unreal, bizarre image of Mexican motherhood in the modern space. As in *Salón México*, mothers are absent. Don Albino has children but he is a widower. The other women who work in the patisserie, like Rita, are single and childless. It would appear in the two films that modernity disrupts the conventional family structure and the result for the woman is death or, as in Luisa's case, delusional behaviour that elides contemporary reality. In their attempts to fill the gap left by absent motherhood both Mercedes and Luisa transgress accepted social boundaries. Figueroa chooses to visually express this transgression in the private spaces the women inhabit. In both films this space is where they live, simple rooms on *azoteas*.

### **Private Spaces and Public Transgressions**

Halfway through *Días de otoño*, Luisa moves from a *vecindad* to an isolated room on the rooftop of an office block. Her move is provoked by the deceit of her fiancé, Carlos. Having waited in vain for Carlos's employer to collect her for their wedding, Luisa takes a taxi and discovers that there is no ceremony booked at the church and no sign of Carlos. The priest looks up Carlos's workplace number and calls. He hands the receiver to Luisa who is told by the

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irate maid who answers that Carlos is already married – to her. Luisa, in her bridal gown, runs from the church. As she arrives at the *vecindad*, jeering children chase her to her room. She falls asleep and wakes later that night. Looking at herself in the mirror she asks '¿por qué?'. She then swivels the mirror and it swings up and down, the camera intermittently catching her face in its reflection, whilst erratic reflections bounce around the room.

It is never clear in the film whether Carlos actually exists and the fact that at the end of the bridal sequences she wakes up, alone in her room, contributes to the ambiguity. The viewer and the other characters in the film only learn about Carlos when Luisa suddenly announces that she is to be married. Her account of how they met is full of dream references. She talks of floating 'sobre un lago como si fuéramos soñando' and how 'todo es como un sueño'. In the flashbacks that accompany her story, in three shots out of four, Carlos is seen lying down with his eyes closed, as if sleeping. Her workmates never meet Carlos and he only appears in the narrative in relation to Luisa's words, that is, he never appears outside of Luisa's own imaginings. The uncertainty as to whether Carlos exists or not is never resolved in the film, but when Luisa moves to the *azotea* her decision to pretend that Carlos and she did marry transmits him firmly into fantasy. Not only does Luisa embark on the fantasy-deception of the marriage, but after a few weeks, she invents a pregnancy as well.

The mirror scene is the first indication to the viewer of Luisa's psychosis and it is the first time that the viewer has more information about Luisa than the characters in the narrative. Figueroa's framing, combined with the dark expressionistic lighting of the scene, foreground the disorientation caused by the swinging mirror and conveys Luisa's breakdown and the schism she experiences between fantasy and reality. When Luisa moves to the *azotea*, Figueroa uses expressionist lighting and short depth of field to communicate visually Luisa's isolation and her delusional double life. As in *Salón México*, Figueroa uses the modernist city icon of flashing neon signs and flickering lights at times in the narrative when the characters reach crisis point. In *Salón*

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*México*, the neon sign flashes through the window of the hotel room as Mercedes stealthily steals back her money from Paco. The light rhythmically exposes and hides her throughout the scene, to suggest the duality of her character and the contradictory morality of a narrative that at once condemns and praises Mercedes. Figueroa uses the light motif again in the scene in which Paco appears in Mercedes's *azotea* room. In their struggle they hit the lamp bulb, the erratic movements of which scatter fractured shadows around the room. In the midst of this chaos of movement and uncontrolled light, Mercedes murders the pimp. In *Días de otoño* Luisa constructs her married life from a book as the flashing neon signs expose and hide her changing reactions. When she begins to switch her bedside lamp on and off Figueroa transforms the scene into a pulsating, visual metaphor of her psychosis.

The private spaces inhabited by Luisa and Mercedes are physical, mental and social transit sites. Mercedes undergoes a transformation from a lower class, abused prostitute to a middle-class, respectable business woman; Luisa transmutes from a provincial, lonely girl to an urban, settled, married woman. In both cases the transformation is connected to an image of motherhood. Mercedes as the bourgeois career woman can become the surrogate mother for her sister and Luisa as a conventional housewife can convert herself into a model mother for a fantasy child. Ironically, in the process of transformation into ideal mother-providers, the women transgress accepted social roles and boundaries. For both Luisa and Mercedes deception appears to be the only option open for them to establish and retain an acceptable place in society. For Mercedes, surrogate motherhood justifies socially unacceptable prostitution, for Luisa the only means she has to establish status, whilst at the same time hide her actual self from society, is to construct a cocoon of fantasy and delusion. In so doing the women highlight the hypocrisy of state and society in its expectations of women and their interpretation of motherhood.

Figueroa's cinematography constructs these private spaces, not just as a physical representation of the rooms where Luisa and Mercedes live, but as the psychological, social and political worlds they inhabit. His cinematographic

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representation of the women within the fictional place reveals the inner workings of the characters that question nationalist notions of motherhood in relation to concepts of modernity. In so doing, Figueroa renders visible the ideological ruptures inherent in the script.

### **Conclusion**

The cinematographic rendition of urban space in *Salón México* and *Días de otoño* comments on the very modernity that gave rise to the cinema. In common with other cinematic images of the city, Figueroa's Mexico City reveals the problems of a nation in frantic development from a rural to an urban economy and demography. In Mexico, the ideological fractures that developed between revolutionary nationalism and the drive to modernity were evident in the narratives and the presentation of characters projected on the screens of the nation. The ideal of the mother, a historically established national icon, was threatened by the new directions modernity offered to women and the changes it brought in social and family structures. In his portrayal of Luisa and Mercedes in relation to the urban space, Figueroa exposes the ambiguities surrounding motherhood in modern Mexico and the consequences of social hypocrisy and repression.

Seen within the wider social context, Figueroa's images echo the unacknowledged, but ever-present, ambivalence successive government regimes experienced, between the drive to modernity and the need to establish national sovereignty and identity. However, such ambiguities were politically advantageous for the ruling elite, which used them as part of a systematic hegemonic practice of social capitalism promoted by the state. The subsequent anxiety, uncertainty and crises this deliberately nurtured ambivalence provoked is projected onto the screen through Figueroa's lens. The cinematography in both *Salón México* and *Días de otoño* situates the characters in their surrounding spaces to expose their duplicity, instability and vulnerability in relation to the city they inhabit. The consequent rupture between the superficial visual beauty of the images and the inherent ugliness of the dislocation, repression, madness, isolation and death that affects these

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characters in the filmic space, exposes a complex of fissures and links between the ideology within each film and the socio-political context that surrounded their production.

What Figueroa expressed on celluloid was the dislocated experience of the modern Mexican space. The images remain locked into the popular memory of Mexico, not only for their impressive aesthetic, but also for the inherent dark fissures they expose. From a microcosm of the pre-Hispanic universe, Mexico City came to represent the nation. This nation-city, so intimately transformed and influenced by notions of modernity, provided the space in which the inherent ambiguities of modernity could be laid bare. Figueroa's cinematography revealed the dislocation of women/the mother through the experience of modernity to reveal the unstable foundations of the city-nation.

The following chapter explores how Figueroa visually articulated the repercussions of modernity in his work with Luis Buñuel. The collaboration, which has been overlooked in studies on Buñuel, was a key professional and creative partnership for both filmmakers. Their work together not only communicates the social crises brought about by the drive to modernity, but also demonstrates transnational mechanisms that relate both to economics and politics and to the aesthetic and narrative development of Mexican cinema.

### Chapter Seven **Exterminating Visions, the Collaboration of Figueroa and Luis Buñuel<sup>xxxiv</sup>**

The best explanation of this film is that, from the standpoint of pure reason, there is no explanation.

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(Luis Buñuel, opening titles *El ángel exterminador*)

I've found the trick of working with Luis, all you have to do is plant the camera in front of a superb piece of scenery, with magnificent clouds, marvellous flowers and when you're ready, you turn your back on all these beauties and film a stony track or a lot of bare rocks.

Gabriel Figueroa (Aranda, 1972: 108)

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Given the above statement by the director Luis Buñuel, it is ironic that scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines have explained his films at great length. Since his début as a filmmaker in 1928, a large body of literature has emerged, conferences organised and, in more recent years, websites established, that analyse the work of this Spanish surrealist from a range of psychological, political and social perspectives.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Moreover, as film scholar Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz has observed, most critical work concentrates on two 'peaks' of Buñuel's career: his surrealist trilogy (*Un chien andalou* (1928), *L'Âge d'Or* (1930) and *Las Hurdes* (1932)), and the Spanish and French films made in the 1960s and 1970s (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003: 2).

However, the abundance of critical material on Buñuel notwithstanding, there is a significant absence. Despite the extensive analysis of symbolism and narrative function, it is notable and, indeed puzzling, that the construction of the image and its relationship to narrative/content has received scant critical attention. In short, there is little critical study of the cinematography and significantly, when it is acknowledged, it is usually in relation to the films Figueroa shot.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Nevertheless, rather than examine Figueroa's work as a collaboration with Buñuel, critics tend to assume that Buñuel dominated a petulant, romantically-inclined cinematographer and pulled him into line. Such views are based on anecdotal evidence rather than empirical proof.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This paucity of critical study accentuates the dismissive attitude towards Figueroa's input in Buñuel's 'Mexican films' and further indicates a lack of informed insight into the fundamentally collaborative nature of film production.



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Peter Evans encapsulates the opinion that Figueroa was creatively restrained on Buñuel's films when he writes about *Los olvidados*:

The nearest that the film allows him [Figueroa] to get to capturing the shapes and patterns of nature comes in a scene where huge cactus plants force their way into the frame. Nothing here, then, of the reedy riversides and cloud-embroidered horizons of *María Candelaria*.

(Evans, 1995: 76)

Evans's perception of Figueroa's work as a cliché of skies and landscape resonates in many of the references to the cinematographer's work to date.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This dismissal of Figueroa's work as a repetitive visual platitude prevents critical exploration of the ways in which he developed a visual style appropriate to each director's narrative vision. Consequently, the importance of Figueroa's creative contribution to the films he worked on, particularly those with Buñuel, has been ignored.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Certainly, Figueroa's comment that opens this chapter is a humorous reference to the creative differences he and Buñuel encountered. Nevertheless, their disagreements formed the basis of a creatively fruitful collaboration. Buñuel's editor, Carlos Savage, commented that the director and cinematographer would argue, but always came to a compromise that best served the aims of the film (Savage: 1999). Carlos Fuentes, one of the few commentators to recognise the importance of their creative partnership, summarises the relationship neatly:

[C]ada uno le ofreció al otro, en cierto modo, la caricatura crítica de sí mismo, pero la plástica "idealizada" de Figueroa contenía [...] la plástica "miserabilista" de Buñuel y ésta, de nuevo aquélla. De la síntesis de semejante tensión habría de nacer una de las más perfectas colaboraciones de la historia del cine.

(Fuentes, 1988: 30)

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Fuentes's perception that the Figueroa-Buñuel collaboration formed a synthesis of styles is backed up by Figueroa himself in an interview in which he talks about his working practices with Buñuel:

Au sujet de la photographie, c'était autre chose. Il [Buñuel] ne s'y intéressait pas et n'y prêtait pas attention. C'est pour cela qu'il n'avait pas un bon sens du cadre. Plus tard, il m'a convaincu qu'il maîtrisait mal cela: "chaque fois que mon cadre est mauvais, dites-le-moi et je le corrigerai".<sup>xxxiv</sup>

(Thoyer, 2000: 98)

As discussed in previous chapters, Figueroa's use of light, composition and his manipulation of the film stock in his work with directors such as Emilio Fernández, Roberto Gavaldón and Ismael Rodríguez, highlights many of the contradictions in films which, on a narrative level, appear to support the status quo. With Buñuel, he adapted his visual expression of the narrative in order to complement and support Buñuel's inherently subversive vision as a filmmaker.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Just as Figueroa's partnership with Emilio Fernández is seen as central to the so-called *época de oro* and 'classical' Mexican cinema, his collaboration with Buñuel may be viewed as an expression of the nation's move to modernity during the 1950s and 1960s. The overt nationalist message that disguised the fundamental transnationalism of the Mexican economy and political scene in many films of the 1930s and 1940s, was no longer tenable in the 1950s ideology of modernisation and progress that looked to the US as its development paradigm (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003: 7). Moreover, the transnational conjunction between the Spanish/European Buñuel and the Mexican/American Figueroa is another manifestation of the latent transnationalism present throughout the history of Mexican cinema that is discussed in Chapter Two. What the Buñuel-Figueroa collaboration

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demonstrates is the mechanisms of transnationalism during the 1950s and 1960s, not only in economic and political terms, but also in relation to creative practices in the development of Mexican filmmaking.

Buñuel entered an industry that went into a steady decline throughout the 1950s. Mexican producers preferred to back poor quality, formulaic projects, developed for maximum box office return rather than risk more challenging productions that had the potential to nourish the failing creativity of the industry. The closed-shop policy of the union, in particular the directors' guild, made it impossible for new talent and ideas to emerge and distribution, under the monopoly of Jenkins and his associates, favoured US imports to the detriment of national production.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The industry had become a close-knit, nepotistic 'film bourgeoisie', with productions funded and produced by a small number of producers and directors who were often related (de la Vega, 1995: 91). The burgeoning stagnation and decadence of the Mexican film business resulted in a production crisis.

Prompted by the change in ideological focus, the relationship between state and culture moved into a period of transition during which there was a call for a revision of the economic, historical and cultural achievements of the revolution. Buñuel actively engaged with the debates that arose during this time, a period that has since been defined as the 'crisis of the national' (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003: 8). Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz has proposed that Buñuel saved Mexican cinema, as he he provided an 'indispensable link' between the so-called classical period, *la época de oro* and the *Nuevo Cine* movement of the 1960s (Acevedo-Muñoz 2003: 5 and 150-151). On the other hand, John King suggests that Buñuel was somewhat of an anomaly in the Mexican industry and that he 'remained an eccentric to the dominant modes of filming and left very few traces in terms of influence or disciples in Mexico' (King, 1990: 130). I would rather concur with Acevedo-Muñoz's proposal that 'Buñuel was an instrumental piece in the complex puzzle of the nation's film history' (2004: 13) and that his 'greater contribution to Mexican cinema is perhaps to have initiated an articulate, critical strand, a new tradition in

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Mexican cinema' (2004: 150). Hence, although Buñuel was situated outside of the mainstream, as King rightly points out, paradoxically the director's position at the margins of the industry was to exert a profound influence on the future direction of Mexican filmmaking.

The proposition that Buñuel left a legacy for Mexican cinema through the introduction of a set of innovative practices is borne out by the formation of the *Nuevo Cine* group at the end of the 1960s.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The group's members enjoyed close links with Buñuel and a double issue of their journal was dedicated to analysis and critique of the director's work. However, there is a significant, paradox in the acknowledgment of Buñuel's films as the *agents provocateurs* of a new cinematic tradition that rejected the perceived reactionary aesthetic and content of the purported *época de oro* and its aftermath: Namely, the majority of Bunuel's films were shot by Figueroa. Certainly the films cited as most influential to the development of Mexican contemporary cinema are a product of their collaboration.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ironically, as one of the principle representatives of 'classic' Mexican cinema, Figueroa is seen as the exemplar of the nationalist cinematic stagnation against which Buñuel's work is set. Indeed the renowned French critic André Bazin wrote:

Certes il y avait chose dans *María Candelaria*, et même dans *La Perla*, que de belles images; mais il était aisé de voir, d'année en année, le formalisme plastique et la rhétorique nationaliste se substituer au réalisme et à la poésie authentique. La surprise exotique passée et les prouesses de Figueroa définitivement réduites aux morceaux de bravoure techniques, le cinéma mexicain s'est trouvé rayé de la géographie critique. [...] Si l'on reparle du cinéma mexicain, c'est grâce à Luis Buñuel.<sup>xxxiv</sup> (Bazin, 1975: 77-78)

Bazin's position is echoed by subsequent scholars and critics of Figueroa's work who focus on his collaboration with Fernández and repeat the

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assumptions that are demonstrated most clearly in Ramírez Berg's work on Figueroa, as discussed in Chapter Two. Indeed, Acevedo Muñoz, taking his lead from Alejandro Rozado and Héctor García Canclini cogently argues that the 'classical' work of Fernández demonstrates resistance to the processes of modernisation and that the trauma of Mexico's drive to modernity was countered by Figueroa's romantic images. He concludes:

If the image of classical Mexican cinema was one of moral resistance to modernization, then the image of Mexico's submission to modernization, which Buñuel dramatizes as one of hopelessness and a completely amoral existence in *Los olvidados*, would be the epitome of what was "anti-classical" in Mexican cinema.

(Acevedo-Muñoz, 2003: 72)

Such fundamental disregard of Figueroa's role in Buñuel's productions serves to repudiate the complex development, not only of Figueroa as cinematographer, but also of Mexican filmmaking from the 1950s onwards. The critical neglect of Figueroa's contribution to Buñuel's productions also functions to perpetuate the opinion of Figueroa as a reactionary creator of 'classical' national cinema. As a consequence, Buñuel remains the *auteur* who single-handedly saved and transformed Mexican film into a progressive cultural form. Due to unchallenged assumptions around Buñuel as an *auteur*, critics fail to recognise that he relied on Mexican filmmakers such as Figueroa to develop his vision and, therefore, Figueroa, together with other filmmakers, was integral to the changes that took place in the Mexican industry. However, this is not to suggest that Figueroa was an iconoclast who set up icons of national identity during the 1930s and 1940s to later smash them. Rather it is to recognise that Figueroa evolved and developed as a filmmaker. As a result, a meaningful analysis of Figueroa must consider his work as part of a career-long process, not isolated within specific historical moments.

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In this chapter, I examine Buñuel's work in Mexico in relation to his most consistent collaboration with a director of photography, Gabriel Figueroa.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In different ways, both filmmakers were exiles. Buñuel spent most of his life outside of his native Spain. Figueroa's social hybridity accentuated the displacement that I argue is integral to one's experience as a Mexican. After a brief consideration of the ways in which notions of exile and 'otherness' correspond to the experience and work of Figueroa and Buñuel, I explore both filmmakers as 'outsiders/insiders' in relation to the social and moral themes conveyed through visual style in *Los olvidados* (1950). Through close analysis of *El ángel exterminador* (1962) and *Él* (1952) I examine how Buñuel and Figueroa employed expressionist conventions and gothic tradition and how they construct a film language that both communicates and challenges the central themes of each film, to provide a subversive insight into the internal workings and demise of the bourgeoisie.

### **Insiders/Outsiders**

Por Buñuel en el megáfono y Figueroa en la cámara confluyen dos corrientes del arte universal: la española y la mexicana....

(Cuevas, 1988: 58)

Buñuel doit être considéré comme un auteur hispanique plutôt qu'espagnol. C'est seulement dans cette ambiance culturelle et esthétique qu'il se sent le plus à l'aise.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

(Almendros, 1985: 29)

In his study of Buñuel, Victor Fuentes (2004) investigates the notion of exile in Buñuel's films. Following on from the work of Marsha Kinder (1993) and Gubern (1976), Fuentes argues that Buñuel's films constitute a 'cinema of exile' (2004: 170). His compelling essay considers the director's work in the context of recent exile and diaspora studies. He considers exile as central to Buñuel's creativity in that it characterises not only the content of his films but also their

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form.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Although Figueroa was resident in Mexico throughout his life, I argue that his experience of Mexico and his perception of the country corresponded to that of the exile. This is not to suggest that Buñuel and Figueroa shared the same view of Mexico. The cinematographer, with his formulation of epic landscape, stood in direct contrast to the director's urban vision of anonymous exteriors and claustrophobic interiors. The often-cited anecdote, used by Figueroa in the quote that opens this chapter, demonstrates their distinct perceptions of Mexico. Evidently, during the *Nazarín* shoot, Buñuel disagreed with Figueroa for his framing of the final shot and told him to turn the camera away from the beautiful clouds over Popocatepetl to reframe on a dirty track. The story is the only reference usually made by critics in relation to their collaboration and it is significant that Figueroa himself repeats it, if only in jest.<sup>xxxiv</sup> However, it is a noteworthy indication of Figueroa's acknowledgement of his differences with Buñuel and the compromises they both made in their work together. I argue that these concessions were made from a space of exile within which they worked through the contradictions they both experienced and shared.

Contradiction is central to Buñuel's work and exile, 'an insoluble contradiction' is a 'main creative force' in his films (Fuentes, 2004: 159). Significantly, the recent reappropriation of Buñuel in a Spain that has ignored the question of the director's status as an exile, an important absence when one considers that Buñuel was resident in Spain only until his twenties and, indeed, in his forties became a Mexican citizen (Fuentes, 2004: 159). Moreover, of the thirty-two films he directed, twenty were Mexican. Consequently, the major part of Buñuel's creative output as a director was developed and made in his adopted country (Pérez Turrent, 2001: 62). I propose that exile was also a compulsion in the imagination and creativity of Figueroa and that this mutual expression of exile, both internal and external, drew Buñuel to collaborate with Figueroa more than any other director of photography.

Whilst the notion of exile has, in general, been ignored in relation to Buñuel (the notable exception being Fuentes's analysis), consideration of Figueroa as

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displaced might appear downright incongruous. Although not obviously an exile, Figueroa's movement between classes, his adoption of oppositional politics and his social hybridity made him an internal émigré.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Victor Fuentes defines exile as 'being in one place, but to have one's imagination focused elsewhere' (2004: 159). The ambiguity of Figueroa's social, political and professional position within Mexico, together with his complex situation in relation to Hollywood and the US, was the foundation upon which he created images of a Mexico that was 'elsewhere'. As I have already suggested in previous chapters and writings, Figueroa's images were at once present in the imagination of the Mexican audiences, yet topographically absent (Higgins, 2004: 216-217).<sup>xxxiv</sup> Indeed, it is a paradox that links Figueroa with Buñuel as transnational, 'extraterritorial' filmmakers and chimes with Fuentes's notion of the 'insoluble contradiction' of exile (Fuentes, 2004: 159).

In her analysis of Buñuel, Marsha Kinder evokes Homi Bhabha's formulation that 'the other is never outside or beyond us, it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves' (1993: 282). Figueroa's expression of 'otherness' could be articulated in similar terms as an internal visual dialogue that emerges onto the cinema screen. In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), Julia Kristeva sees the process of displacement as the experience of the 'stranger' whom she argues is as much internal as external. She/he is a sum of the social and psychological inconsistencies, integral in all of us, that we can refuse to accept or to which we can submit, but which we can never ignore. Continual transformation is the central dynamic of 'the stranger', who inhabits a constantly changing, transitory space, on an infinite journey. The contradictions manifest in successive Mexican political regimes and their ideologies are fundamental to the way the nation has developed and resonate with Kristeva's notion of the continual transfiguration of internal/external space. As a Mexican, Figueroa may be seen like Kristeva's outsider, the stranger who is a sum of internal contradictions brought about by his social context, yet who is also in a state of constant transformation. Indeed, Figueroa stated that his transfiguration of reality through the lens of a camera led to a transformation in himself (1995).<sup>xxxiv</sup>



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In his compelling and moving set of essays, 'Reflections on Exile', Edward Said (2001: 173) observes that exile is 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home'. His statement brings together the notion of external exile from place with the idea of internal exile from self. Significantly, Said goes on to describe the essential link between exile and nationalism as being 'like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other' and nationalism, he argues, is a result of alienation (2001: 176). The innate schism in the idea of estrangement evokes the fissures and rifts embodied by Kristeva's stranger and that corresponds to an understanding of the complexities of Mexican nationalism, discussed in previous chapters.

Following on from Said's and Kristeva's notions of rift, alienation and displacement, I suggest that exile is innate to the Mexican experience. Mexicans encounter displacement from their own space, time and culture in the same way as émigrés. Said's rift between 'self and a true home' resonates with the constant and consistent encounter with the 'other' in Mexico between the internal self (physiological, psychological and emotional as *mestizos*) and the external home (the everyday position in a post-colonial space) and results in a constant, simultaneous exile and homecoming. Being a stranger in one's own land becomes a dialogic existence that Figueroa externalises through the lens.

### The Cinematographic Eye

'The camera is the eye of the marvellous. When the eye of the cinema really sees, the whole world goes up in flames.'

(Luis Buñuel)<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Eyes have been important in Buñuel's work and also in Figueroa's. They have been literally assaulted by Buñuel with knitting needles and razors and exposed by Figueroa in his use of close-ups of wide, unblinking gazes. The tension between physically attacking perception (Buñuel) and exposing perception

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(Figueroa), is central when looking at their work together. The cultural combination of the Spanish outsider/insider Buñuel with the Mexican insider/outsider, Figueroa results in an edginess that makes films such as *Los olvidados*, *El ángel exterminador* and *Él* so incisive in their social criticism.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Perception is the key to Buñuel's films and is the key that Figueroa took to open up a new style and approach. The camera is the eye. It is ever-present, watchful, yet non-judgmental. Critical judgement in Buñuel's films is made on the soundtrack with the bang of drums, the roll of thunder, the sounds of guns, battles and the incessant bleating of sheep. Just as in *Las Hurdes*, where the camera sits and watches while the donkey is killed by a swarm of bees, the camera eye in *Los olvidados*, *Él* and *El ángel exterminador* watches and records. But it is not a dispassionate documentation. The eyes behind the camera-eye guide the gaze to question established ideas and to unsettle perception.

The wide-angle lens that Figueroa used in films with other directors such as Chano Urueta and Emilio Fernández opened up scenes, widened perspective and combined with infra-red filters and meticulous lighting, the cinematographer elevated the conventional melodrama of the script into epic super-reality.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Conversely, in Buñuel's films, Figueroa captures the sense of confinement within the limits of the realities the characters inhabit through the use of little or no depth of field. The planes of vision are flat and claustrophobic and when focal depth is used it works in conjunction with light and composition to emphasise the characters' isolation from each other.

Given his experience in the Mexican film industry of the 1930s and 1940s, Figueroa was an expert on the narrative and visual conventions of melodrama and knew how to manage these codes for subtly subversive ends. In his use of lighting and manipulation of film stock, Figueroa underlined many of the contradictions in, what on the surface, are films which support the status quo,

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throwing a shadow over the bourgeois liberalism that was central to most of the films on which he worked. With Buñuel, he continued to explore and manipulate the conventions to complement and support Buñuel's cinematic aims.

A sense of being marooned is present in all of Buñuel's films, yet it is most evident in the Mexican productions. Each character in Buñuel's films is, in effect, a victim of a social shipwreck. The films communicate a need to escape the confines of the rational and launch into the sea of the unconscious. The need to embark upon a voyage to new perception underpins all the characters, yet most do not recognise their need and the few that do are prevented from acting by the self-imposed chains of perceived 'decency' and 'rules'. Figueroa's subtle manipulation of space and light work in conjunction with Buñuel's vision of inner solitude to create characters and worlds that are trapped within themselves. In *Los olvidados*, Figueroa exposes the bleak landscape of urban deprivation and the psychological and social confines that poverty imposes. The material opulence of *Él* and *El ángel exterminador* and the privilege the characters demand as members of the bourgeoisie serve to maroon the characters in their personal psychoses. From the poor to the ruling elite, Figueroa frames and isolates the characters within a Buñuelian space.

### **Moral, Social and Visual Contrasts in *Los olvidados***

In Buñuel's movies the seen and the ordinarily unseen inhabit the same film space; he pictures the picturable, and strongly alludes to what cannot be pictured.

(Wood, 1993: 44)

Michael Wood's perceptive observation of Buñuel's images leads one to consider the construction of space in his films. In the following analysis of *Los olvidados*, I investigate how Figueroa's use of light and shadow together with contrasts in space and composition, communicate complex themes that

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interweave with the displacement of the mother figure.

What strikes the viewer immediately about *Los olvidados* are the visual contrasts. The oppositions of darkness and light, the vast empty wastelands and cramped interiors, day and night. Throughout the film, these oppositions are set against each other to build a visual dialectic that reflects the contradictions and conflicts within the characters. The exteriors are vast, lit by an empty hard flat light of an urban wilderness. Construction is abandoned and only scaffolded skeletons of progress are left, the anonymity and timelessness of the urban space captured by Figueroa's choice to shoot at midday when the harsh, shadowless light flattens perspective.

In contrast to the exterior scenes in the interiors, Figueroa emphasises the claustrophobic, crowded and cramped conditions. The use of key lights focused on small areas confines space and the textured shadows that fall away delineate the edges of the interior spaces. Further, many compositions take in the ceiling and walls and wall-to-wall beds dominate every room, their iron frames throw shadows that entrap characters in prison-like bars of light and dark. The interior space is the site for the heightened emotional scenes. The shadowy barn, with its half-hidden animals is a primal space that threatens rather than comforts. It is a place in which the characters hide or seek refuge and it is the site of the ultimate struggle between Jaibo and Pedro, that culminates in Pedro's death. Yet, despite the cramped representation of the interiors and the use of group mid-shots and long-shots, Figueroa's lighting also separates characters to emphasise their isolation. He creates this paradox of solitude and claustrophobia with a key light focused on the main area of action and low-intensity fill lights which leave the dark corners in shadow and backgrounds beyond the main action in darkness.

One of the best examples of how Figueroa works with the contradictions and oppositions in the film that operate on multiple levels within the narrative is the scene between Jaibo and Pedro in the cutler's shop. The main oppositions are

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within the characters themselves. The boys each have light and dark elements to their characters which are constantly in flux. It is an ebb and flow which creates in the viewer a visceral awareness of the grey areas between and within the two to generate in the viewer a compassionate detachment. Like two planets in orbit, each one moves constantly from near/light side to far/dark side within themselves (internally) and to each other (externally). Each boy is a double of the other and the highly theatrical space that Figueroa constructs in the cutler's workshop is a visual manifestation of the fluctuation between the internal and external, insider and outsider, light and shadow.

With the use of one key light source, Figueroa fills the shop with layers of light. The viewer's eye is directed from the darkened foreground over the lit table and the glittering lights to the straight, dark angles of the bellows and Pedro silhouetted against the brightly lit background, hazy with wood smoke. Figueroa isolates the interior from the exterior. The high contrast created by a full backlight as the main light source through the exterior door makes silhouettes which together with the glow of the fire and the smoky atmosphere constructs a *Niebelungen*-like cave, underscored on the soundtrack with the rhythmic clanging of a hammer on white-hot steel. Jaibo enters and is silhouetted against the door frame, a diabolic, faceless figure, barely recognisable through the smoke. Throughout the scene, the boys move between areas of light and shadow, from silhouette to distinct form, to underline the battle between good and bad, the struggle between circumstance and opportunity. Figueroa frames the boys throughout nearly all of the two shots with one of them against a clearly defined background light and the other against a sharply defined area of dark.

The viewer never sees the boys together in Pedro's home, yet they both have pivotal scenes with the mother in the cramped communal dwelling. The mother aggressively rejects Pedro, yet passively and then seductively accepts Jaibo. In these scenes each boy is lit to reflect the complex working through of the son-mother/male-female relationship. With Pedro, this complex turns on

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the ambiguity and conflict with the mother and with Jaibo it is the development from a surrogate son to a lover. Figueroa lights Pedro as luminously innocent, and then, through the stark use of contrast and shadow, as aggressive and confused. Jaibo continuously moves back and forth between dark shadow and light. In the seduction scene the lighting and focal depth soften both the mother and Jaibo, to isolate the pair from their surroundings and to draw them together in the complicity of seduction.

In Mexico, the mother is perceived as an icon, the foundation of national creation myths, both the mother of God in Coatlicue and the betrayed Mother in Malintzin.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The loss and duality of the mother in the myths are fundamental to the contradictions in the formation of national identity discussed in Chapter Two. *Los olvidados* is essentially about the lost or absent mother. Pedro is rejected by his mother, Ojitos has only a father who is also absent and he is left to suckle a goat as his substitute nurturer. Meche's mother is an invalid and confined to bed and Jaibo's lack of mother leaves him with only a fantasy of her, that of the *Virgen*. I argue that Figueroa's visual representation of Jaibo and Pedro expresses aspects of poverty, social injustice and the deep contradictions in the foundation myth of the mother and its effects on Mexican national identity. The social reality shown in the film challenges the myth of the mother. For this reason, Buñuel cannot be seen, to ally himself with social realism, because in this film and, indeed, all of his work, the mythic is equally pervasive in and influential on reality as social conditions and circumstances.

In *Los olvidados* Buñuel attacks the gut of Mexico to present the viewer with a world in which mothers are absent, or worse, reject their offspring. In showing a society where the mother-virgin, becomes the mother-lover, he presents an Oedipal society.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Buñuel's mother-virgin-lovers are not the martyrs one finds in Fernández films which comfortably support the national *complejo* of veneration and victimisation. The tough presentation of the Mexican mother in Buñuel's films suggests a route to subversion, which if followed would lead to

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a true revolution in the Mexican psyche. This is why, in exposing the imperceptible chasm between Mexican myth and Mexican social reality, in *Los olvidados*, Buñuel was so heavily condemned in Mexico.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Figueroa establishes the binary paradoxes of the film visually, working with the director to present the viewer with two alternative resolutions in Jaibo and Pedro, each of which ends in darkness and death. Rather than simply establish the two characters as narrative and visual opposites, Buñuel and Figueroa work together to communicate the complex internal conflicts in the individual that result from poverty and social injustice. The visual presentation of *Los olvidados* may superficially resemble the documentary aesthetic of the Italian neo-realist style but under closer, more detailed analysis of the cinematography it is clear that the visual style plays with the cinematic conventions of melodrama and German expressionism.

Consequently, through lighting and composition, Figueroa makes explicit profound levels of meaning that constitute Buñuel's world view. As Peter Evans states, '*Los olvidados* moves beyond the prose of documentary and into the Mexican Gothic, transforming dross into metaphor, the ordinary into the fantastic, the known into the unknown and disturbing' (1995: 78). In his study of Buñuel, Evans employs a Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm to analyse the director's work and makes a connection in his discussion of *Los olvidados* between the gothic tradition and Freud's essay on the uncanny. The innate links between psychoanalysis and the gothic tradition have formed the basis for a substantial body of scholarship that has, in turn, informed analysis of the horror genre in film studies. Rather than add to the by now considerable body of psychoanalytic analyses of Buñuel's work, I will analyse the gothic tradition evident in *El ángel exterminador* and *Él* from a socio-political standpoint. Darkness and death, so fundamental in the content, form and visual language of *Los olvidados* is central to the gothic tradition. In these films Buñuel and Figueroa develop the gothic in relation not to the underclass, but to the

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tradition's established social environment, the ubiquitous mansion of the bourgeoisie and the ruling elite.

The Bourgeoisie in *Él* and *El ángel exterminador*

I don't believe anyone is morally determined forever because he was born in such-and-such a social class. Being born bourgeois doesn't condemn anyone to think or behave like a bourgeois for his entire life. Co-existence changes one's manner of being [...] If you and I were forcibly locked up together, [...] we would almost certainly end up hating each other.

(Luis Buñuel)<sup>xxxiv</sup>

After the international success of *Los olvidados*, two key films in the Buñuel-Figueroa collaboration position themselves far from the impoverished locations of that first film. Both *El ángel exterminador* (1962) and *Él* (1952) are situated in the privileged space of the bourgeoisie. In *El ángel exterminador* a group of dinner guests are inexplicably unable to leave the music room of their host's house. Over the days and weeks they are trapped, the neurotic turmoil of their internal selves erupts and destroys the well-mannered superficiality of their external behaviour. The eruption of psychosis is the main theme of *Él*, in which the protagonist, the upstanding pillar of the church Francisco Galván de Montemayor (Arturo de Cordóva), crumbles into a paranoid delirium during the course of which he loses his hold on reality and attempts to circumcise his wife.

Both films examine and dissect the capitalist class, the owners of society's means of production and bulk of its wealth. The term bourgeois carries with it an inherent sense of materialist values and conventional attitudes. Its root dates back to the French sixteenth century, late-latin word *burgus*, meaning castle or



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fortified house. Buñuel's incisive definition of the bourgeoisie takes the home/*burgus* as fundamental to his depiction of a ruling class that jealously guards the privilege of its social space, the material expression of which is the house, the mansion or the stately home. Buñuel reveals that in its protection of wealth and social advantage, the bourgeoisie imprisons itself literally within the walls of the home whilst it metaphorically incarcerates itself within class ideology.

The *burgus* is central to Buñuel's narratives and is the site where characters unravel and degenerate. In *El ángel exterminador*, dinner party guests are inexplicably trapped in the music room of a mansion and in *Él*, the overwhelming presence of an eccentric house and Francisco's frenzied pursuit of a hopeless legal case to regain lost family properties traps him into a cycle of repression, violence and potential castration. Entrapment in the confines of the *burgus* forces the characters to express the deep values and morals that lurk underneath the niceties of acceptable behaviour.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In so doing, Buñuel's characters either slip into paranoia and psychosis or die. Consequently, the construction of space is central to Buñuel's vision of how the bourgeoisie functions and is the key to its potential collapse. As cinematographer, Figueroa constructs the filmic space that constitutes the *burgus*. In both films Figueroa visually links the characters' relationship with exterior, physical space to their interior emotional and psychological state. Therefore, a close analysis of the way in which the cinematographer manipulates space in both *Él* and *El ángel exterminador* illustrates the Buñuelian definition of the bourgeoisie and consequently heightens the subversive impact of both films.

Intrinsically linked to this construction of the bourgeois narrative and visual space in the two films is the use of gothic convention. Indeed, there is a direct reference to the gothic in the opening scenes of *El ángel exterminador*. The host, Edmundo Nóbile, proposes a toast to Sylvia, one of the guests, for her performance (they have just watched her sing in the title role of Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*). The opera is an adaptation of Walter Scott's gothic novel which comments on the demise of the ruling class brought about

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by extreme changes in the main characters of the book and in external events. Scott's nineteenth-century novel, in keeping with other gothic narratives of the period, is a critical examination of the conflicts between the *nouveau riche* nobility, the traditional, aristocratic landowners and the developing bourgeoisie, themes that resonate throughout Buñuel's œuvre.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

*El ángel exterminador* and *Él* reverberate with gothic motifs. The primal gothic space of the castle/mansion and the key elements of the curse, darkness and omens, internal conflict, madness and physical and psychic changes of state are present in both films. Further, the key gothic concepts of duality, entrapment and the darker, inner self that overcomes the outer 'civilised' self are central to the development of the films' main characters.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In keeping with Buñuel's vision of the bourgeoisie, Figueroa develops a gothic visual language drawn from the motifs and style of German expressionist cinema, which he learned from his mentor Toland. Toland was a former apprentice of the renowned cinematographer Karl Freund who believed 'the cameraman ought to create shadow. That is much more important than creating light' (Sears, 2003: 170). In his early films, *Der Januskopf* (*Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) (Murnau, 1920) and *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), Freund developed what Fred Botting calls the 'modernist Gothic' in film. This distinct visual style draws on the narratives and archetypes of the gothic novel to create an imagery of high contrast, heavy shadows, acute angles and distorted sets to express the dark, supernatural and political themes inherent in the gothic tradition (Botting, 1996: 165-168). In Hollywood Freund developed the 'modernist Gothic' further and in so doing founded the signature style of the horror genre through the seminal films *Dracula* (Browning, 1931) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (Florey, 1932) and his directorial works *The Mummy* (1932) and *Mad Love* (*The Hands of Orlac*) (1935). Buñuel, together with the surrealist group in Paris, had a fascination for the gothic novel that fed into surrealism through symbolism.<sup>xxxiv</sup> This, combined with the direct influence of Karl Freund on Figueroa, provoked an elaborate interplay of themes, texture and space in *Él* and *El ángel exterminador* that further developed 'modernist Gothic' imagery.

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## Gothic Style and Alienation

[P]rovided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity.

(Said, 2000: 184)

The deep-focus, long shots that introduce the dinner guests as they enter the mansion in *El ángel exterminador* continue during the dining-room sequence. The eye-level tracks from behind the serving table draw attention to perspective and locate the viewer as an observer. Later in the scene, the high angle left-to-right track down the dining table reveals the guests in greater detail and underscores the conscious distance between the viewer and the characters. Edmundo offers a toast to which the guests respond conventionally. When the sequence is repeated the bourgeois norms of behaviour begin to break down. The guests ignore Edmundo and talk over his speech. As in the repeated entrance of the guests to the mansion, the action and the camera position change during this repetition. The camera angle together with the change in action distance the viewer in a technique reminiscent of Brecht's alienation theory (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in which the artifice of the drama is made transparent in order to detach the viewer.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The 'subjectivity' proposed in the above quotation from Said is not a self-centred, 'indulgent' view but rather, as he suggests, a basis for incisive critique. Figueroa, with the exile's eye, uses a technique that provides the viewer with a space in which to retain their objectivity and not identify with the characters. His combination of long tracking shots and expressionist/gothic composition and lighting in both *El ángel exterminador* and *Él*, work with the dialogue and action to distance the viewer and provide a critical, objective space that

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accentuates Buñuel's razor-sharp critique of the bourgeoisie.

### **The Gothic *Burgus* and Bourgeois Space**

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.

(Said, 2000: 185)

The dominance of wide shots and long tracks at the opening of *El ángel exterminador* change to mid long-shots and mid-shots in the music room. When the guests realise they are trapped, the lighting becomes more expressionist and as the social niceties break down in the group Figueroa flattens perspective. The entrance to the music room from the adjacent drawing room resembles a proscenium arch. The room becomes the stage on which the action unfolds. On three occasions the room is framed in extreme long shot with the butler Julio in foreground. As he stands and observes the action he assumes the viewer's position and draws attention to the place of the viewer in relation to the film's action. Eventually, Julio too is drawn into the room and is unable to leave. The camera, however, is able to enter and leave the room whilst the guests remain fixed and immutable. As exiles, Figueroa and Buñuel had an ability to cross borders and break barriers, to position themselves both inside and outside. In *El ángel exterminador*, with the camera movement in and out of the room, they position the viewer as an exile in a constantly mutable (yet critically objective) position in relation to the action.

During a gothic-like thunderstorm, Figueroa positions the camera in a wide-angle wide-shot from the drawing room to the music room. The foreground

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drawing room remains in darkness, lit only by the occasional flash of lightning. In the background of the frame the viewer sees the music room like a brightly lit stage in the darkness. The guests move around as aimless as the sound of the piano. The sense of watching a piece of theatre is once again evoked, but in the following shot the viewer is back on the stage with the players in a reverse angle of the wide shot. Figueroa also uses tracks to take the camera through the arch that divides the music and drawing rooms and as a result accentuates the viewer's position as both inside and outside the action. Further, the absence of conventional point-of-view shots and reverse angle shots in the film prevent the viewer from being drawn into an empathetic relationship with the characters and the tracking shots distance the viewer from the action to create a cinematographic *Verfremdungseffekt*.

Moreover, the view of the music room and the characters' place within it is constantly challenged. The gothic struggle between the inner and outer self is made visually manifest as the narrative unfolds. Figueroa uses a variety of angles and lenses to provide a continual change in perspective. On one hand, he employs long-shots and mid-shots on a wide-angle lens with lighting set-ups that provide expressionistic layers of light and dark to create depth and width to the space. On the other, there are mid-close ups and close-ups shot on a short lens that flatten depth of field, to isolate characters from the space around them and each other. This change of depth and perspective is constant throughout the film. The visual dialectic that builds up between confinement and space captures the characters' contradictory responses to their situation and each other. It visually encapsulates the fundamental gothic trope of constant vacillation from the inner to outer selves expressed by the guests in their dealings with others and themselves in the movement from communication to secrecy, honesty to deceit, love to hate, decency to perversity, life to death. As the darker, inner selves emerge from the characters, Figueroa's lighting becomes more expressionist with the backgrounds often dropping into complete darkness and individuals lit in subtle pools of light. The bourgeois space becomes the gothic *burgus*.

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### **The *Burgus* as Madness in *Él***

In *Él*, Francisco's outward formality and need for order stands in direct contrast to the style of his mansion. Designed by his father, the house is inspired by Art Nouveau. There are no straight lines in the architecture, the graceful curves and sensuality of the style made popular during the Porfirian era, is exaggerated in *Él* to provide a subtle sense of spatial disequilibrium. In architectural terms the interior of the house lacks harmony and conventional proportion and the spaces are disconcertingly awry and claustrophobic. The rich chaos of line contrasts dramatically with the rigid symmetry of the stairway that dominates many scenes in the film as a central element of the *mise-en-scène* and are a physical representation of Francisco's stasis within his erratic and unstructured psychosis, represented by the flowing curves of the Art Nouveau that surrounds the straight, heavy lines of the steps. Further, the stairway is where Francisco's mental state becomes most evident in the scene in which he paces to and fro across the confines of the stairs, banging the railings with a stick, in a fit of frustrated manic rage.

Significantly, the exterior of the mansion is only seen in the brief scenes of the garden and when Francisco spies on Gloria (Delia Garcés) from his bedroom window. Like the mansion in *El ángel exterminador*, a high wall surrounds the house. Francisco's home is indeed the *burgus*, a luxurious lair that both protects and entraps. However, in *Él*, more so than in *El ángel exterminador*, the interior represents the inner self of the owner. In *El ángel exterminador* the exterior becomes a site of spectacle as crowds gather to wonder at the plight and reasons for the guests entrapment. By contrast, in *Él* the viewer experiences Francisco's psychosis from within. Francisco is a paradigmatic gothic character. His outer self is a paragon of decency and an exemplar of bourgeois noblesse oblige. His inner self, that overcomes the controlled exterior, is dark and psychotic. The cause for the internal character to surface is the imminent loss of the *burgus* and the impending threat of modern values and ideology, represented by the introduction of the engineer Raúl Conde (Luis Beristáin), into Francisco's reactionary world.

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Whereas in *El ángel exterminador*, the *burgus* is a ubiquitous physical presence that entraps the characters within the music room, in *Él* the mansion is a manifestation of the larger, lost *burgus* that Francisco frantically tries to recuperate. As a bourgeois, his social, physical and psychological identity is intimately linked with the *burgus* and the increasing futility of his legal battle to regain family property lost in the revolution is integral to his decline into psychosis.

Figueroa systematically structures the visual representation of Francisco's decline in the way he lights Francisco and Gloria in relation to one another and the spaces around them with a system of expressionist lighting, angles and framing throughout the film. He lights Gloria with a soft backlight to create a halo-like effect. The diffuse key and fill light soften her face and give it a luminous quality.<sup>xxxiv</sup> By contrast, Figueroa lights Francisco with a strong key light at an acute angle to the side of his face. The position of the light creates a hard shadow that bisects the face to give Francisco a literal light and dark side. Figueroa's use of diffuse backlight on one character and strong key light on the other in a two-shot is significant as it directly challenges the convention that characters should be equally lit in shot. In his choice to shoot the scenes between Gloria and Francisco in this way, Figueroa demonstrates a clear expressionist commitment to build character and narrative tensions through careful construction of the image. Further, in the Francisco-Gloria two-shots, shadows, architectural elements or furniture provide subtle barriers and divide the couple in frame. Francisco dominates the two shots with Gloria and combined with Figueroa's consistent use of low angle close ups, Francisco's overpowering presence pervades the film.

As Gloria and Francisco's relationship develops, Figueroa accentuates the light and dark, high angle and low angle camera positions and use of depth of field to express the deterioration of the couple and the destructive dynamic between them caused by Francisco's psychotic behaviour and which culminates in his visual and narrative breakdown in the cathedral bell tower. Figueroa uses a wide-angle lens to accentuate the acute low angle and the size of the bell

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looming above the couple. Figueroa sets the aperture for the interior and consequently the silhouette of the bell is exaggerated against a bleached-out sky. The low angle and dark silhouettes create an abstract image and as Francisco attacks Gloria in his attempt to push her out of the tower, the lack of spatial reference increases the sense of disequilibrium and danger. In the bell tower Francisco's relationship with Gloria comes to the point of no return and he declines into psychosis.

Significantly, this final destruction of Francisco's marriage and sanity takes place in an archetypal gothic location. In the gothic tradition, churches and towers are spaces which simultaneously isolate and empower the characters and the inherent blasphemy of characters such as Count Dracula and Doctor Frankenstein are echoed in Francisco's psychotic declarations. The bell tower is also an extension of Francisco's *burgus*. He regards it as his natural home and his position as naturally equal to God. On his return to his mansion, Francisco paces the stairway, running and banging a stick back and forth over them. Figueroa's use of exaggerated depth of field, creates huge, bar-like shadows to run up the stairs and over the hallway and straight symmetrical lines of light and dark obscure the erratic curves of the Art Nouveau interior. Francisco's entrapment on the rigid lines of the steps and his inability to move away from them communicates his impotence and frustration.

In his visual construction of the mansion and other spaces that represent the *burgus* in the film, Figueroa employs expressionist techniques to demonstrate the psychosis and isolation of Francisco. Like the guests in *El ángel exterminador*, Francisco is marooned in his space, isolated by his ideology.

*Él* and *El ángel exterminador* are exemplars of the convergence of surrealist, expressionist and gothic conventions. The inherent social censure of these traditions is understood and employed by Buñuel and Figueroa in the films and, indeed, in other productions on which they collaborated, to present perspicacious and provocative social critiques. In *Él* and *El ángel exterminador* the combination of Buñuel's direction and Figueroa's



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cinematography creates spaces in which the viewer can experience the dissection and visual extermination of the bourgeoisie.

### **Beyond the Buñuel-Figueroa Collaboration**

An acknowledgement and study of the ways in which Buñuel and Figueroa worked together broadens the way in which we understand and read the films on which they collaborated. Through contextual and close visual analysis of how Figueroa constructed the image in Buñuel's films, the fundamental influence of transnationalism on the development of creative practices in Mexican cinema is revealed. Further, detailed analysis of visual style substantiates the argument that cinematographers are central givers of meaning in film production. Moreover, a critique of the Figueroa-Buñuel collaboration demonstrates the breadth of Figueroa's work as a director of photography and his pervasive influence in the development of Mexican cinematic practice. Previous critical studies focus principally on the twenty-year period of Figueroa's collaboration with Fernández and position them as progenitors of the so-called classical Mexican style of the *época de oro*. Consequently, Figueroa's fundamental influence in the creative development of subsequent Mexican cinema has been elided, particularly in relation to *Nuevo Cine* and the changes in production structure and practice in the last half of the twentieth century.

The notion of exile explored in this chapter opens up a new way to read the work of Figueroa and Buñuel. The inherent 'outside'-ness of exile enabled the two filmmakers to assume a critical distance to the Mexican industry and the cultural contexts in which they worked. An acknowledgment of that distance facilitates a new position from which to read their films and consequently reveals fresh meanings and issues. Such a reading reveals ambiguities and contradictions that Buñuel and Figueroa expose in society, through a cinematic *Verfremdungseffekt* that enables the viewer to position themselves critically in relation to the fundamental issues of poverty, class and power in the films.

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Filmmaker and critic Ado Kyrou suggests that in his early films, Buñuel's dream-like style was created through an instinctive process to evoke reality far more potently than filmmakers who 'blinded' viewers with traditional cinematic conventions (1963: 16). Although Figueroa's son and assistant, Gabriel Figueroa Flores, has said that Figueroa also worked instinctively, I argue that Buñuel and Figueroa based such 'gut-feeling' on empirical experience and an in-depth, intellectual understanding of filmic convention (Figueroa Flores: 2002). In the subversion of these traditional cinematic practices, the two filmmakers created a cinematic alienation effect that placed the viewer in a critical position in relation to the narrative.

Examination of the collaboration of surrealist Buñuel and expressionist Figueroa throws new light on the structure of Mexican society, its internal workings and psychoses. The concept of the *burgus* as the bourgeois powerhouse, alienation and the use of gothic tradition are areas for further investigation in relation to Buñuel's oeuvre and, indeed Figueroa's work with other directors. The representation of class from a cinematographic viewpoint is also a realm for further consideration, particularly the ways in which class is represented cinematographically and the effects of transnational collaborations and co-productions on the representation of class in diverse cultures.

Figueroa worked with Buñuel on seven films over a fifteen-year period. It was the most consistent collaboration with a director of photography that Buñuel had. Indeed, he publicly cited Figueroa as his preferred cinematographer (Poniatowska, 1996: 106). Throughout their collaboration, the cinematographer and director challenged dominant Hollywood conventions to develop a visual style that subtly complemented the subversive narratives of the films. Figueroa's meticulous manipulation of expressionist technique within the conventions of the gothic tradition visually exposed the recurrent themes of isolation, social displacement, exile and madness in Buñuel's films.

The Figueroa-Buñuel collaboration was a creative partnership that not only

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produced a unique film language, but also expressed the transnational nature of cinema. For different reasons, both director and cinematographer were outsiders/insiders in Mexican society. From this place of mutual exile they formed a fascinating partnership that opens up new perspectives and directions for the enjoyment and critical study of both the Mexican and international film industries.

## Chapter Eight

### New Perspectives

My contact with Gabriel Figueroa began in March 1989 when I visited him in his studio to seek advice on a film I was making for Channel Four about the photographer, Tina Modotti. I had heard that Figueroa planned to initiate a feature film based on Modotti's experiences in Mexico and over copious amounts of tea he generously and enthusiastically suggested ideas on how I might shoot the film. The most striking comment he made during our chat was that I should film the Mexican scenes in black and white. His reason was that to express the politically complex and difficult relationship Modotti and others had with the country it should not be camouflaged by colour, but explored through the bare bones of light and shadow, like the monochrome engravings and prints of Leopoldo Méndez and José Guadalupe Posada. His political aesthetic of a black and white Mexico fascinated me as a filmmaker and I asked if he could recommend a film for me to view. He picked up the telephone, called the Cineteca Nacional and two hours later I sat alone in a large auditorium to watch *La perla* for the first time. We shot the Tina Modotti film, but the executive producer insisted that the Mexican scenes remain in colour, as it would be what the audience would 'expect' of Mexico. I was struck at the time by the contradictory perception of the country between the British programme producer and the Mexican cinematographer and, moreover, by the producer's conscious need to feed the audience with an image of

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exoticism and otherness which he perceived as inherently and, indeed, garishly colourful.

During the subsequent twelve years when I lived, worked and travelled in Mexico I came to understand, on an emotional as well as an intellectual level, what Figueroa had meant by his comment. From my work and friendship with photographer Mariana Yampolsky, my travels through the country with my husband and a surreal year spent as a production executive at the largest American television network, Televisa, I was faced with multiple realities and perceptions of Mexico. Trips to visit our Indian *compadres* in remote communities high in the Sierra interfaced with long lunches in fine restaurants with our *compadres* from the metropolitan bourgeois elite. Air-conditioned meetings with media moguls in the US and Mexico ran alongside long sessions with a Huichol shaman to produce a video with which he could raise money for his community. It was through experiences such as these that I gained a privileged education on, and an awareness of the overwhelming social, political, economic and historical complexity of Mexico, which subsequently guided the trajectories of my thoughts for this book. My initial surprise at Figueroa's comments on Mexico changed the longer I lived in the country. The more I encountered diverse perceptions of the Mexican space, the more compelling I found his perception and the more aware I became of how Figueroa's images were etched into the national imagination. My decision to write this book came, therefore, from a direct experience of the country and a desire to investigate why Figueroa's films remain so integral to the national imagination.

As a filmmaker, I am acutely aware of the uneasy relationship between the practice of making films and programmes and theoretical interpretations of cinema and television. As a film academic, I am constantly aware of the divide between those who teach theory and those who teach practice. In this book, I draw on my experience as a filmmaker to inform my reading of Figueroa's role as a cinematographer and I build on my academic background to develop critical approaches to the images Figueroa created in order to further

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understanding of the processes that produced them. My professional position as both a filmmaker and academic and my personal experience as a naturalised Mexican and British citizen situate my work in a place between, a professional and personal contact zone where diverse influences converge and re-form.

Significantly, the Mexican anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz Adler, who lives and works in the US, writes of a similar experience and situates his work on the margin as it is 'a bit too theoretically inclined for most Mexican social scientists, a bit too engaged with Mexican political quandaries for most of my American colleagues' (Lomnitz Adler, 2001: xix). Whereas in this book I concentrate on the creation and use of filmic space, Lomnitz Adler focuses on the concept of the national space and the complex, ever-changing arena in which it is positioned. In the same way that Lomnitz Adler is compelled to acknowledge how his life experience informs his work, so am I. Figueroa's work has and continues to engage me on both an emotional/personal and intellectual/professional level. Moreover, it communicates to many others in the same way, whether Mexican or non-Mexican, academic or other.

Throughout the long process of working on the book I have had to make difficult decisions on what to include and what to edit in order to construct new ways of answering the complex questions that surround Figueroa. The result has been to pull focus away from the anecdotal and biographical accounts of Figueroa and to shift towards a more critical engagement with his work that tackles the complicated conundrum posed in the Introduction. Is Figueroa Mexico? Is Mexico Figueroa's? In order to do this, I have examined and unpacked the processes that gave Figueroa and his images the iconic status that has maintained a critical stasis around his work. As a consequence, I have proposed new positions from which to make fresh readings not only of Figueroa's work and cinematography in general, but also of Mexican cinema.

Such a change in critical perspective provokes a shift away from the strong current of national discourse traditionally employed in discussions of Figueroa (and indeed, Mexican cinema in general) to refocus and reframe his images

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within a transnational context. My critique of Charles Ramírez Berg's commendable, if restricted analysis outlines the prevalence and limitations of this national debate in relation to the work of Figueroa, whilst the exemplary work of Seth Fein and Ana López, on transnational politics and economics, informs the critical paradigm that I deploy in the subsequent analyses of Figueroa's work. The use of the transnational approach advocated by Fein and López exposes the forces that determined and defined Mexican cinema's relationship to dominant ideologies in the post-revolutionary period and into the 1960s. In addition to the work of Fein and López, I draw on that of film scholars, Julianne Pidduck and Alistair Phillips. Although neither of these scholars writes specifically about cinematography, both centralise visual and spatial relationships in their analyses which link directly to an understanding of the role of the cinematographer and how the mechanics of cinematography is integral to the creation of meaning in a film. Pidduck's and Phillips's methodologies, as discussed in Chapter One, redress the bias that developed in film studies from one which privileged looking *into* films, to one which proposes new ways of looking *at* the film image and, as a result, reveals new and often surprising readings.

Consequently, the analytical models suggested by Pidduck, Phillips, Fein and López form the basis of a critical paradigm that I develop in Chapters Three to Five. Combining close visual analysis which concentrates on the technical construction of the image and spatial relationships with empirical socio-economic and political information, I have exposed the inherent transnationalism of the production contexts that undermined or problematised previously accepted readings of Figueroa's work. When, for example, in Chapter Three, I examine his cinematography of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* and the ways in which it interrelates with the music and its production context, the film is transformed. Instead of the reactionary position scholars have traditionally assigned to de Fuentes's film, the analysis reveals integral links between the nascent Mexican film industry and the transnational commercial interests of radio and recording entrepreneurs and consequently provokes a more dynamic, complex reading of the film. In Chapters Four and Five,

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examination of Figueroa's construction of the image exposes ambiguities between the films' discourses and the political, economic and ideological contexts within which they were produced. The analysis of Figueroa's rural landscapes, which became the imagined and remembered Mexico, throws into relief how the cinematographer's construction of space and characters within the landscape conveys the complexity of race and class hierarchies inherent in notions of Mexican national identity. In the same way, Figueroa's representation of urban spaces, discussed in Chapter Five, reveals complex issues inherent in Mexico's drive to modernity and its effect on core national symbols, specifically the mother. Finally, the exploration of Figueroa's work with Buñuel in Chapter Six, situates Figueroa as an exile in his own country to suggest that his position as an 'outsider' may have enabled him to simultaneously communicate, whilst subversively challenging, the central themes of the films on which he worked.

Close study of Figueroa's work demonstrates that investigation into his choices of light, lens, filter and his manipulation of the film stock in the laboratory, work to expose a complex web of contradiction in the films. As argued in Chapter Two, some scholars, notably Charles Ramírez Berg, have noted these problematic fissures between the films Figueroa worked on and the ideological contexts in which he shot them, yet they paste over the gaps that the images expose with inadequately defined notions of *mexicanidad* and *lo mexicano*. As a result, they evade critical engagement with inherent complexities in the films. This study challenges the use of non-specific concepts of Mexicanity in relation to Figueroa's work and in so doing reveals the complicated relationship between his construction of images, their correlation with a narrative and a film's position in relation to dominant ideology.

On the one hand, in developing a critical paradigm that combines the work of Mexican cultural historians with that of film scholars, I explore ways in which the fissure between looking *at* and looking *into* films can be bridged. On the other hand, an examination of the conflation of Figueroa and the nation from a transnational angle reveals the national assumptions that surround his films.

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The adoption of such an alternative approach enables new readings of not only Mexican cinematic aesthetics but also cinematography across a range of production contexts.

Contrary to his image as a reactionary, national filmmaker of the so-called 'golden age', I have shown that Figueroa constantly developed and communicated the Mexican reality in which he worked through his creation of space on the screen. Figueroa's images resonate with the ambivalence that successive governing elites communicated as they negotiated between the need to establish a coherent national identity and the transnationalism inherent in the drive to modernity. As a result of this ideological vacillation, Figueroa captured on celluloid the dislocated experience that the modern Mexican space provoked. Therefore, far from being fixed within a particular historical moment in national film production, Figueroa was a fundamental influence on the creative development of Mexican cinema throughout the mid-twentieth century, particularly in relation to the *Nuevo Cine* group and beyond. His politics and life choices positioned him outside of the Mexican mainstream. In this study's acknowledgement of his 'otherness' and his position as an internal exile, new perspectives suggest alternative readings of the films on which he collaborated. Finally, my aim has been always to pull focus on Figueroa, not to situate him as dominant in frame and an alternative auteur, but rather to highlight the collaborative nature of filmmaking, specifically the relationship between the director and cinematographer and the production of meaning in a film text.

As stated in the Introduction, given the dearth of critical attention on Figueroa and cinematography, this book cannot pretend to be a definitive study, but rather a starting point for future investigation of Figueroa and other related areas. Because of constraints of space and time, I have concentrated on only eight films out of the more than two hundred on which Figueroa collaborated. Comparative studies of his work with various directors would provide further diverse and enlightening results. Also, I chose not to include Figueroa's work with the US directors John Ford, John Huston and Don Siegel in Mexico and



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how the vision of Mexico in *The Fugitive* (1947), *The Night of the Iguana* (1963), *Under the Volcano* (1983) and *Two Mules for Sister Sarah* (1969) compares with that of Figueroa's collaborations with Mexican directors. It is, however, a compelling subject. In addition, there remains much to extrapolate from the discussion of Figueroa's landscapes, both rural and urban in Chapters Four and Five and the development of the national space in the Mexican imagination. Moreover, the notion of exile in relation to Figueroa's images and the gothic tradition that are investigated in Chapter Six are other subjects that merit further attention.

Beyond an understanding of Figueroa's work, this book offers directions for more wide-ranging analyses of transnationalism and cinema in relation to national filmmaking practices and further critical study of cinematography and the work of individual cinematographers in relation to the political, economic, production and ideological contexts that surround their work.

To be sure, Figueroa's legacy to me as filmmaker and academic has been and will continue to be invaluable. After all, my intention is to produce work that are both compelling to look *into* and *at*.

#### National Awards

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1936 | <i>Alla en el Rancho Grande</i><br>Periodistas Cinematográficos                 |
| 1937 | <i>Bajo el cielo de México</i><br>Periodistas Cinematográficos                  |
| 1938 | <i>Mientras México duerme</i><br>Periodistas Cinematográficos                   |
| 1939 | <i>La noche de las mayas</i><br>Comité Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica |
| 1940 | <i>La casa de rencor</i>  |

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Periodistas Cinematográficos

- 1942 *Historia de un gran amor*  
Periodistas Cinematográficos
- 1943 *Flor Silvestre*  
Periodistas Cinematográficos
- 1944 *María Candelaria*  
Periodistas Cinematográficos
- 1946 *Enamorada*  
Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes  
Cinematográficas
- 1947 *La perla*  
Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes  
Cinematográficas
- 1948 *Río Escondido*  
Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes  
Cinematográficas
- 1949 *Pueblerina*  
Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes  
Cinematográficas
- 1950 *Los olvidados*  
Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes  
Cinematográficas
- 1952 *El rebozo de Soledad*

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	Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes Cinematográficas
1953	<i>El niño y la niebla</i> Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes Cinematográficas
1958	<i>La sonrisa de la Virgen</i> Instituto Católico de Cinematografía
1960	<i>Macario</i> Centro Deportivo Israelita Instituto Católico de Cinematografía <i>La cucaracha</i> Centro Deportivo Israelita
1962	<i>Ánimas Trujano</i> Centro Deportivo Israelita PECIME, Diosa de Plata <i>Juana Gallo</i> Centro Deportivo Israelita
1963	<i>El hombre de papel</i> Instituto Católico de Cinematografía
1964	<i>Días de otoño</i> PECIME Diosa de Plata
1966	<i>¡Viva Benito Canales!</i> Instituto Católico de Cinematografía
1973	<i>María</i>

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Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes  
Cinematográficas

1978 *Divinas palabras*  
Ariel de plata, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes  
Cinematográficas  
PECIME Diosa de Plata

### **International Awards**

1938 *Allá en el Rancho Grande*  
La Mostra Internazionale de Venezia, Italy

1946 *María Candelaria*  
Festival du Film de Cannes, France

1947 *Enamorada*  
Festival Mondial du Film et des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium

1948 *La perla*  
La Mostra Internazionale de Venezia, Italy  
*Río Escondido*  
Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Czechoslovakia  
*Salón México*  
Festival Mondial du Film et des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium

1949 *La perla*  
Madrid Film Festival, Spain  
Golden Globe, Los Angeles, US  
*Maclovía*  
Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Czechoslovakia  
*La malquerida*  
La Mostra Internazionale de Venezia, Italy

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- 1950      *Pueblerina*  
Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Czechoslovakia  
Madrid Film Festival, Spain
- 1960      *Macario*  
Festival du Film de Cannes, France
- 1961      *Macario*  
Boston Film Festival, US  
Ánimas Trujano  
San Francisco Film Festival, US
- 1964      *Días de otoño*  
Panamá Film Festival
- 1965      *The Night of the Iguana*  
Oscar nomination, Los Angeles, US
- 1968      *El escapulario*  
World Hemisfair, US
- 1978      *Cananea*  
Czechoslovakian Dramatic Artists Union's Award  
Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Czechoslovakia

Special Awards

- 1947      Gold Medal: Society of Sciences and Arts, Mexico City
- 1967      Honorary Doctorate: St Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas

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1971	National Arts Award, Mexico
1972	Salvador Toscano Award, Mexico
1977	Special Achievement Award, Diosa de Plata, Mexico
1978	Czechoslovakian Dramatic Artists Union Award
1981	Quetzalcoatl Award, Mexico City
1982	Outstanding Achievement: Universidad Autónoma de México
1983	Dolores del Río award, Mexico City
1984	Tribute at the San Francisco Film Festival
1985	Tribute at the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego
1986	Tribute at the Rivertown Film Festival, Saint Paul, Missouri Tribute at the Toronto International Festival, Toronto Fiftieth Anniversary Tribute of <i>Allá en el Rancho Grande</i> , Cineteca Nacional, Mexico City
1987	Mexican Film Producers and Distributors Award Olmec Head Award, Tabasco, Mexico Golden Ariel for Lifetime Achievement, Academia Mexicana de Ciencias y Artes Cinematográficas
1989	Freedom of Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico
1990	Tribute: Cinemafest 90, San Juan, Puerto Rico

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- 1991      Tribute: UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles
- 1992      Tribute: Valladolid Festival, Spain
- 1994      American Society of Cinematographers International Award,  
Los Angeles  
Tribute: Munich Film Festival  
Tribute: National Lottery, Mexico City

### **Gabriel Figueroa Filmography**

As stills photographer:

- 1932      *Revolución*  
Dir: Miguel Contreras Torres  
(Miguel Contreras Torres)
- 1933      *Almas encontradas*  
Dir: Raphael J Sevilla  
(Industrial Cinematográfica)
- Sagrario*  
Dir: Ramón Peón  
(Aspa Films de México)
- La mujer del puerto*  
Dir: Arcady Boytler  
(Eurinda Films)
- La noche del pecado*  
Dir: Miguel Contreras Torres  
(Miguel Contreras Torres)

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*La sangre manda*

Dir: José Bohr/Raphael J Sevilla

(Producciones Cinematográficas Internacionales)

**Enemigos**

Dir: Chana Ureta

(Atlántida Films)

1934

*Chucho el roto*

Dir: Gabriel Soria

(Cinematográfica Mexicana)

*Corazón bandolero*

Dir: Raphael J Sevilla

(México Films)

*Tribu*

Dir: Miguel Contreras Torres

(Miguel Contreras Torres)

As lighting engineer:

1933

*El escándalo*

Dir: Chano Ureta

(Ren-Mex)

1934

*El primo Basilio*

Dir: Carlos de Nájera

(Eurinda Films)



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As second camera:

**1933**        *Viva Villa!*  
Dir: Howard Hawks  
(Metro Goldwyn Meyer)

As camera operator:

1935        *Vámonos con Pancho Villa*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(CLASA Films)

*María Elena*  
Dir: Raphael J Sevilla  
(Impulsora Mex-Art)

1936        *Las mujeres mandan*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(CLASA Films)

*Cielito lindo*  
Roberto O'Quigley  
(José Luis Bueno)

As associate director of photography:

1947        *Tarzan and the Mermaids (Tarzán y las sirenas)*  
Dir: Robert Florey  
(Figueroa with Jack Draper)  
(RKO Radio Pictures)

As director of photography:

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1936      *Allá en el Rancho Grande*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Alfonso Rivas Bustamente and Fernando de Fuentes)

1937      *Bajo el cielo de México*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Compañía Mexicana de Películas)

*Jalisco nunca pierde*  
Dir: Chano Urueta  
(Producciones Sánchez Tello)

*Canción del alma*

Dir: Chano Urueta  
(Compañía Mexicana de Películas)

*La Adelita*  
Dir: Guillermo Hernández Gómez  
(Iracheta y Elvira)

*Mi Candidato*  
Dir: Chano Urueta  
(Alfonso Rivas Bustamente)

1938      *Refugiados en Madrid*  
Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(Films de Artistas Mexicanos Asociados: FAMA)

**Padre de más de cuatro**

Dir: Roberto O'Quigley

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(José Luis Bueno)

*La casa del ogro*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Compañía Mexicana de Películas)

*Los millones de Chaflán*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(Producciones Sánchez y Tello y Cía.)

*Mientras México duerme*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(Producciones Iracheta y Elvira)

*La bestia negra*

Dir: Gabriel Soria  
(Hermanos Soria)

1939 *La noche de las mayas*

Dir: Chano Urueta  
(FAMA)

**Papacito lindo**

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Compañía Nacional de Películas)

*Los de abajo (Con la división del norte)*

Dir: Chano Urueta  
(Nueva América ó Producciones Amanecer)

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*La canción del milagro*

Dir: Rolando Aguilar

(Pro-Mex)

*¡Qué viene mi marido!*

Dir: Chano Ureta

(Films Mundiales and Filmarte)

1940

*Allá en el trópico*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes

(Producciones Fernando de Fuentes)

*El jefe máximo*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes

(Producciones Fernando de Fuentes and Financiera de Películas, S.A.)

*Con su amable permiso*

Dir: Fernando Soler

(Producciones Azteca)

*El monje loco*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo

(Martínez y Méndez)

*Creo en Dios (Secreto de confesión)*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes

(Producciones Fernando de Fuentes)

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- La casa de rencor*  
Dir: Gilbeto Martínez Solares  
(Films Mundiales)
- 1941 *Ni sangre ni arena*  
Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(POSA Films)
- El rápido de las 9.15*  
Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(CLASA Films)
- ¡Ay, qué tiempos, señor Don Simón!*  
Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Films Mundiales)
- El gendarme desconocido*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films Internacional)
- La gallina clueca*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Films Mundiales)
- Virgen de medianoche (El imperio del hampa)*  
Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(Ixtla Films)

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**Mi viuda alegre**

Dir: Manuel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

1942      *Cuando viajan las estrellas*

Dir: Alberto Gout  
(Films Mundiales)

*Historia de un gran amor*

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Films Mundiales)

*Los tres mosqueteros*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

*El verdugo de Sevilla*

Dir: Fernando Soler  
(Films Mundiales)

*La Virgen que forjó una patria*

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Films Mundiales)

*El circo*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

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1943      *Flor silvestre*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Films Mundiales)

**El espectro de la novia**

Dir: René Cardona  
(Films Mundiales)

*El as negro*

Dir: René Cardona  
(Films Mundiales)

*La mujer sin cabeza*

Dir: René Cardona  
(Films Mundiales)

*Distinto amanecer*

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Films Mundiales)

*María Candelaria*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Films Mundiales)

*La fuga*

Dir: Norman Foster  
(Producciones México)

1944      *El corsario negro*

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Dir: Chano Urueta  
(CLASA Films)

*El intruso*

Dir: Mauricio Magdaleno  
(Films Mundiales)

**Adiós Mariquita linda**

Dir: Alfonso Patiño G.  
(Luis Manrique)

*Las abandonadas*

Dir: Emilio Fernandez  
(Films Mundiales)

*Más allá del amor*

Dir: Adolfo Fernández Bustamante  
(Films Mundiales)

*Bugambilia*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Films Mundiales)

1945

*Un día con el diablo*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

*Cantaclaro*

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Producciones Interamericanas)



- 
- 1945      *La perla*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Águila Films)
- 1946      *Su última aventura*  
Dir: Gilberto Martínez Solares  
(Producciones Mercurio)
- Enamorada*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Panamericana Films)
- 1947      *The Fugitive (El fugitivo)*  
Dir: John Ford  
(Argosy Pictures)
- La casa colorada*  
Dir: Miguel Morayta  
(José Elvira)
- Río Escondido*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Raúl de Anda)
- María la O*  
Dir: Adolfo Fernández Bustamante  
(Producciones Amador)

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1948

*Maclovia*

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Filmex)

*Dueña y señora*

Dir: Tito Davison

(Filmex)

*Medianoche*

Dir: Tito Davison

(Filmex)

Salón México

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Films Mundiales)

*Pueblerina*

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Ultramar Films with Producciones Reforma)

*Prisión de sueños*

Dir: Victor Uruchúa

(Artistas y Técnicos Asociados)

1949

*El embajador*

Dir: Tito Davison

(Filmex)

*Opio (la droga maldita)*

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Dir: Ramón Peón  
(Maya Films)

*La malquerida*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Francisco de P. Cabrera)

*Un Cuerpo de Mujer*

Dir: Tito Davison

*Duelo en las montañas*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*The Torch (Del odio nació el amor)*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Eagle Lion)

*Nuestras vidas*

Dir: Ramón Peón  
(Ramón Pereda)

*Un día de vida*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Cabrera Films)

*Los olvidados*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Ultramar Films)

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*Víctimas del pecado*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Producciones Calderón)

*Pecado*

Dir: Luis César Amadori  
(Filmex)

*Islas Marías*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Rodríguez Hermanos)

*El gavián pollero*

Dir: Rogelio A González  
(Producciones Mier y Brooks)

**El bombero atómico**

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

*Siempre tuya*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Cinematográfica Industrial Productora de Películas)

1951

*Los pobres van al Cielo*

Dir: Jaime Salvador  
(Modesto Pacó y Felipe Cahero)

*Un gallo en corral ajeno*

Dir: Julián Soler  
(Industrial Productora de Películas, CIPPSA)

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**La bienamada**

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Producciones México)

*Hay un niño en su futuro*

Dir: Fernando Cortés  
(Industrial Productora de Películas, CIPPSA)

*El mar y tú*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Producciones Galindo Hermanos)

*¡Ahí viene Martín Corona!*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

**El enamorado**

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarias)

1952

*El rebozo de soledad*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(STPC de la RM and Cinematográfica TeleVoz)

*Ni pobres ni ricos*

Dir: Fernando Cortés  
(Televoz)

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*Cuando levanta la niebla*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Tele Voz)

*El Señor fotógrafo*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(Posa Films Internacional)

*Dos tipos de cuidado*

(Ismael Rodríguez)

*Ansiedad*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

*Él*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Ultramar Films)

1953

*Camelia*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(Filmex)

**Llévame en tus brazos**

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Producciones Calderón)

*El niño y la niebla*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón

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(Cinematográfica Grovas)

*La Rosa Blanca (Marti)*

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Películas Antillas)

1954

*La rebelión de los colgados*

Dir: Emilio Fernández and Alfredo B Crevenna

(José Kohn)

*La mujer X*

Dir: Julián Soler

(Filmex)

### **Pueblo, Canto y Esperanza**

Dir: Rogelio A González

(Alianza Cinematográfica)

*Estafa de amor*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado

(Filmadora Chapultepec)

*El monstruo en la sombra*

Dir: Zacarías Gómez Urquiza

(Producciones Cub-Mex)

1955

*La Doncella de Piedra*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado

(Filmadora Chapultepec)

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### **Historia de un amor**

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(Internacional Cinematográfica)

*La escondida*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(Alfa Films)

*Canasta de cuentos mexicanos*

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(José Kohn)

*La Tierra del Fuego se apaga*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Mapol)

1956

*Una cita de amor*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Cinematográfica Latino Americana y Unipromex)

*Sueños de oro*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías and Suevia Films)

### **El bolero de Raquel**

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films Internacional)



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*Mujer en Condominio*

Dir: Rogelio A González

(Cinematográfica Latinoamericana and Ramex Films)

1957 *Aquí está Heraclio Bernal*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón

(Cinematográfica Cumbre)

**La venganza de Heraclio Bernal**

Dir: Roberto Galvadón

(Cinematográfica Cumbre)

*La rebelión de la sierra*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón

(Cinematográfica Cumbre)

*Flor de mayo*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón

(Cinematográfica Latino Americana)

*Una golfa*

Dir: Tulio Demicheli

(Producciones México)

*La sonrisa de la Virgen*

Dir: Roberto Rodríguez

(Películas Rodríguez)

1958 *Carabina 30-30*

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Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(Filmadora Chapultepec and Galindo Hermanos)

*Impaciencia del corazón*

Dir: Tito Davison  
(Filmadora Chapultepec and Galindo Hermanos)

*Café Colón*

Dir: Benito Alazraki  
(Filmadora Chapultepec and Galindo Hermanos)

**Isla para dos**

Dir: Tito Davison  
(F. Mier S.A.)

*Nazarín*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

1958 *La cucaracha*

Dir: Ismael Rodríguez  
(Películas Rodríguez)

*La estrella vacía*

Dir: Emilio Gómez Muriel  
(Producciones Corsa)

1959 *Sonatas*

Dir: Juan Antonio Bardem (Con Cecilio Paniagua)  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

---

*Los ambiciosos (La fièvre monte à El Pao)*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Filmex and Films Broderie)

*Macario*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(CLASA films)

1960 *The Young One (La joven)*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Producciones Olmecca)

**Juana Gallo**

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

1961 *La Rosa Blanca*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*Ánimas Trujano*

(Un Hombre Importante)  
Dir: Ismael Rodríguez  
(Películas Rodríguez)

*El tejedor de milagros*

Dir: Francisco del Villar  
(Sagitario Films)

---

1962      *El ángel exterminador*  
Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Gustavo Alatraste)

*Días de otoño*  
Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

1963      *El hombre de papel*  
Dir: Ismael Rodríguez  
(Ismael Rodríguez)

*Entrega inmediata*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

**En la mitad del mundo**

Dir: Ramón Pereda  
(Productora Ecuador)

*The Night of the Iguana*  
Dir: John Huston

1964      *Escuela para solteras*  
Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

*El gallo de oro*  
Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

---

*Los tres calaveras*

Dir: Fernando Cortés  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*Los cuatro Juanes*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

*Simón del Desierto*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Gustavo Alatríste)

1965

*Un alma pura*

Dir: Juan Ibañez  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

*Las dos Elenas*

Dir: José Luis Ibañez  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

*Lola de mi vida*

Dir: Miguel Barbachano Ponce  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

**Cargamento prohibido**

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*¡Viva Benito Canales!*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(Películas Mundiales and TV Producciones)

---

1966      *Pedro Páramo*  
Dir: Carlos Velo  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*El asesino se embarca*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*El escapulario*  
Dir: Servando González  
(Producciones Yanco)

*Domingo salvaje*  
Dir: Francisco del Villar  
(Sagitario Films)

1966      *El cuarto chino*  
(The Chinese Room)  
Dir: Albert Zugsmith  
(Famous Players Co. with CLASA Films Mundiales and  
Sagitario Films)

*Su excelencia*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

*Los ángeles de Puebla*  
Dir: Francisco del Villar

---

(Producciones Bueno)

1967      *El jinete fantasma*  
Dir: Albert Zugsmith  
(Famous Players Co. with CLASA Films Mundiales and  
Sagitario Films)

*Mariana*

Dir: Juan Guerrero  
(Juan Guerrero)

*Corazón Salvaje*

Dir: Tito Davison  
(CLASA Films Mundiales with Durona Productions and  
Contra Cuadro)

*¿La Pax?*

Dir: Wolf Rilla  
(Comité Organizador de los XIX Juegos Olímpicos)

1968      *El terrón de azúcar/The Big Cube*  
Dir: Tito Davison  
(Producciones Anco and Motion Picture International)

*Narda o el verano*

Dir: Juan Guerrero  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

1969      *Two Mules for Sister Sarah*  
Dir: Don Siegel

---

(Universal Pictures)

1970

*Kelly's Heroes*

Dir: Brian C Hutton

(Metro Goldwyn Meyer)

*La generala*

Dir: Juan Ibañez

(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*El cielo y tú*

Dir: Gilberto Gazcón

(Producciones Brooks)

*El profe*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado

(POSA Films)

1971

*Los hijos de Satanás*

Dir: Rafael Balédon

(Producciones Brooks)

*Hijazo de mi vidaza*

Dir: Rafael Baledón

(Oro Films)

*María*

Dir: Tito Davison

(Ramón Pereda and CLASA Films Mundiales)



---

1972      *El monasterio de los buitres*  
Dir: Francisco del Villar  
(Estudios Churubusco and Francisco del Villar)

*El señor de Osanto*  
Dir: Jaime Humberto Hermosillo  
(Estudios Churubusco)

**Once a Scoundrel**

Dir: George Shaefer  
(Carlyle Productions)

*Interval*

Dir: Daniel Mann  
(Euro-American and Estudios Churubusco)

1973      *El amor tiene cara de mujer*  
Dir: Tito Davison  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*Los perros de Dios*  
Dir: Francisco del Villar  
(Estudios Churubusco)

1974      *El llanto de la tortuga*  
Dir: Francisco del Villar  
(CONACINE)

*Presagio*  
Dir: Luis Alcoriza  
(CONACINE and Producciones Escorpión)

---

1975      *Coronación*  
Dir: Sergio Olhovich  
(CONACINE and CLASA Films Mundiales)

*La vida cambia*  
Dir: José Estrada  
(CONACINE and STPC)

*Maten al León*  
Dir: José Estrada  
(CONACINE and DASA)

*Cananea*  
Dir: Marcela Fernández Violante  
(CONACINE)

1975      *Los aztecas*  
Dir: Marcel Boudou  
(TV France)

1977      *Divinas palabras*  
Dir: Juan Ibañez  
(CONACINE)

*La casa del pelícano*  
Dir: Sergio Véjar  
(CONACINE)

- 
- Los hijos de Sánchez*  
Dir: Hal Barlett  
(CONACINE)
- D.F.*  
Dir: Rogelio González  
(CONACINE)
- Te quiero*  
Dir: Tito Davison  
(CONACINE)
- 1978 *A paso de cojo*  
Dir: Luis Alcoriza  
(CONACINE and Producciones Escorpión)
- Casa Pedro Domecq*  
Dir: Juan Ibáñez  
(commercial)
- 1980 *El jugador de ajedrez*  
Dir: Juan Luis Buñuel  
(TV France)
- México mágico*  
Dir: Alejandro Tavera  
Raúl Zermeño/Luis Mandoki
- 1981 *México 2000*  
Dir: Rogelio González  
(CONACINE)

---

*El heroe desconocido*

Dir: Julián Pastor  
(Televisine S.A. de C.V.)

1983 *El corazón de la noche*  
Dir: Jaime Humberto Hermosillo  
(Conacite Uno)

*Under the Volcano*  
Dir: John Huston  
(Conacite Uno and Ithaca)

### **Gabriel Figueroa Filmography**

As stills photographer:

1932 *Revolución*  
Dir: Miguel Contreras Torres  
(Miguel Contreras Torres)

1933 *Almas encontradas*  
Dir: Raphael J Sevilla  
(Industrial Cinematográfica)

*Sagrario*  
Dir: Ramón Peón  
(Aspa Films de México)

*La mujer del puerto*  
Dir: Arcady Boytler  
(Eurinda Films)

---

*La noche del pecado*

Dir: Miguel Contreras Torres  
(Miguel Contreras Torres)

*La sangre manda*

Dir: José Bohr/Raphael J Sevilla  
(Producciones Cinematográficas Internacionales)

**Enemigos**

Dir: Chana Ureta  
(Atlántida Films)

1934

*Chucho el roto*

Dir: Gabriel Soria  
(Cinematográfica Mexicana)

*Corazón bandolero*

Dir: Raphael J Sevilla  
(México Films)

*Tribu*

Dir: Miguel Contreras Torres  
(Miguel Contreras Torres)

As lighting engineer:

1933

*El escándalo*

Dir: Chano Ureta  
(Ren-Mex)

---

1934        *El primo Basilio*  
Dir: Carlos de Nájera  
(Eurinda Films)

As second camera:

**1933**        *Viva Villa!*  
Dir: Howard Hawks  
(Metro Goldwyn Meyer)

As camera operator:

1935        *Vámonos con Pancho Villa*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(CLASA Films)

*María Elena*  
Dir: Raphael J Sevilla  
(Impulsora Mex-Art)

1936        *Las mujeres mandan*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(CLASA Films)

*Cielito lindo*  
Roberto O'Quigley  
(José Luis Bueno)

As associate director of photography:

1947        *Tarzan and the Mermaids (Tarzán y las sirenas)*

---

Dir: Robert Florey  
(Figueroa with Jack Draper)  
(RKO Radio Pictures)

As director of photography:

1936      *Allá en el Rancho Grande*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Alfonso Rivas Bustamente and Fernando de Fuentes)

1937      *Bajo el cielo de México*  
Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Compañía Mexicana de Películas)

*Jalisco nunca pierde*  
Dir: Chano Urueta  
(Producciones Sánchez Tello)

*Canción del alma*

Dir: Chano Urueta  
(Compañía Mexicana de Películas)

*La Adelita*  
Dir: Guillermo Hernández Gómez  
(Iracheta y Elvira)

*Mi Candidato*  
Dir: Chano Urueta  
(Alfonso Rivas Bustamente)

1938      *Refugiados en Madrid*  
Dir: Alejandro Galindo

---

(Films de Artistas Mexicanos Asociados: FAMA)

**Padre de más de cuatro**

Dir: Roberto O'Quigley  
(José Luis Bueno)

*La casa del ogro*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Compañía Mexicana de Películas)

*Los millones de Chaflán*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(Producciones Sánchez y Tello y Cía.)

*Mientras México duerme*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(Producciones Iracheta y Elvira)

*La bestia negra*

Dir: Gabriel Soria  
(Hermanos Soria)

1939 *La noche de las mayas*

Dir: Chano Urueta  
(FAMA)

**Papacito lindo**

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes  
(Compañía Nacional de Películas)



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*Los de abajo (Con la división del norte)*

Dir: Chano Urueta

(Nueva América ó Producciones Amanecer)

*La canción del milagro*

Dir: Rolando Aguilar

(Pro-Mex)

*¡Qué viene mi marido!*

Dir: Chano Urueta

(Films Mundiales and Filmarte)

1940

*Allá en el trópico*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes

(Producciones Fernando de Fuentes)

*El jefe máximo*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes

(Producciones Fernando de Fuentes and Financiera de Películas, S.A.)

*Con su amable permiso*

Dir: Fernando Soler

(Producciones Azteca)

*El monje loco*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo

(Martínez y Méndez)

---

*Creo en Dios (Secreto de confesión)*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes

(Producciones Fernando de Fuentes)

*La casa de rencor*

Dir: Gilbeto Martínez Solares

(Films Mundiales)

1941

*Ni sangre ni arena*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo

(POSA Films)

*El rápido de las 9.15*

Dir: Alejandro Galindo

(CLASA Films)

*¡Ay, qué tiempos, señor Don Simón!*

Dir: Julio Bracho

(Films Mundiales)

*El gendarme desconocido*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado

(POSA Films Internacional)

*La gallina clueca*

Dir: Fernando de Fuentes

(Films Mundiales)

*Virgen de medianoche (El imperio del hampa)*

---

Dir: Alejandro Galindo  
(Ixtla Films)

**Mi viuda alegre**

Dir: Manuel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

1942      *Cuando viajan las estrellas*  
Dir: Alberto Gout  
(Films Mundiales)

*Historia de un gran amor*  
Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Films Mundiales)

*Los tres mosqueteros*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

*El verdugo de Sevilla*  
Dir: Fernando Soler  
(Films Mundiales)

*La Virgen que forjó una patria*  
Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Films Mundiales)

---

*El circo*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

1943

*Flor silvestre*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Films Mundiales)

**El espectro de la novia**

Dir: René Cardona  
(Films Mundiales)

*El as negro*

Dir: René Cardona  
(Films Mundiales)

*La mujer sin cabeza*

Dir: René Cardona  
(Films Mundiales)

*Distinto amanecer*

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(Films Mundiales)

*María Candelaria*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Films Mundiales)

*La fuga*

Dir: Norman Foster

---

(Producciones México)

1944      *El corsario negro*  
Dir: Chano Urueta  
(CLASA Films)

*El intruso*  
Dir: Mauricio Magdaleno  
(Films Mundiales)

**Adiós Mariquita linda**

Dir: Alfonso Patiño G.  
(Luis Manrique)

*Las abandonadas*  
Dir: Emilio Fernandez  
(Films Mundiales)

*Más allá del amor*  
Dir: Adolfo Fernández Bustamante  
(Films Mundiales)

*Bugambilia*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Films Mundiales)

1945      *Un día con el diablo*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

---

*Cantaclaro*

Dir: Julio Bracho

(Producciones Interamericanas)

1945

*La perla*

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Águila Films)

1946

*Su última aventura*

Dir: Gilberto Martínez Solares

(Producciones Mercurio)

*Enamorada*

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Panamericana Films)

1947

*The Fugitive (El fugitivo)*

Dir: John Ford

(Argosy Pictures)

*La casa colorada*

Dir: Miguel Morayta

(José Elvira)

*Río Escondido*

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Raúl de Anda)

- 
- María la O*  
Dir: Adolfo Fernández Bustamante  
(Producciones Amador)
- 1948 *Maclovia*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Filmex)
- Dueña y señora*  
Dir: Tito Davison  
(Filmex)
- Medianoche*  
Dir: Tito Davison  
(Filmex)
- Salón México  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Films Mundiales)
- Pueblerina*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Ultramar Films with Producciones Reforma)
- Prisión de sueños*  
Dir: Victor Uruchúa  
(Artistas y Técnicos Asociados)
- 1949 *El embajador*

---

Dir: Tito Davison  
(Filmex)

*Opio (la droga maldita)*  
Dir: Ramón Peón  
(Maya Films)

*La malquerida*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Francisco de P. Cabrera)

*Un Cuerpo de Mujer*  
Dir: Tito Davison

*Duelo en las montañas*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*The Torch (Del odio nació el amor)*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Eagle Lion)

*Nuestras vidas*  
Dir: Ramón Peón  
(Ramón Pereda)

*Un día de vida*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Cabrera Films)



---

*Los olvidados*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Ultramar Films)

*Víctimas del pecado*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Producciones Calderón)

*Pecado*

Dir: Luis César Amadori  
(Filmex)

*Islas Mariás*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Rodríguez Hermanos)

*El gavián pollero*

Dir: Rogelio A González  
(Producciones Mier y Brooks)

**El bombero atómico**

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

*Siempre tuya*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Cinematográfica Industrial Productora de Películas)

1951 *Los pobres van al Cielo*  
Dir: Jaime Salvador

---

(Modesto Pacó y Felipe Cahero)

*Un gallo en corral ajeno*

Dir: Julián Soler

(Industrial Productora de Películas, CIPPSA)

### **La bienamada**

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Producciones México)

*Hay un niño en su futuro*

Dir: Fernando Cortés

(Industrial Productora de Películas, CIPPSA)

*El mar y tú*

Dir: Emilio Fernández

(Producciones Galindo Hermanos)

*¡Ahí viene Martín Corona!*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías

(Producciones Zacarías)

### **El enamorado**

Dir: Miguel Zacarías

(Producciones Zacarias)

1952

*El rebozo de soledad*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón

(STPC de la RM and Cinematográfica TeleVoz)

---

*Ni pobres ni ricos*

Dir: Fernando Cortés  
(Televoz)

*Cuando levanta la niebla*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Tele Voz)

*El Señor fotógrafo*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(Posa Films Internacional)

*Dos tipos de cuidado*

(Ismael Rodríguez)

*Ansiedad*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

*Él*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Ultramar Films)

1953

*Camelia*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(Filmex)

**Llévame en tus brazos**

Dir: Julio Bracho

---

(Producciones Calderón)

*El niño y la niebla*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(Cinematográfica Grovas)

*La Rosa Blanca (Marti)*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Películas Antillas)

1954

*La rebelión de los colgados*

Dir: Emilio Fernández and Alfredo B Crevenna  
(José Kohn)

*La mujer X*

Dir: Julián Soler  
(Filmex)

**Pueblo, Canto y Esperanza**

Dir: Rogelio A González  
(Alianza Cinematográfica)

*Estafa de amor*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(Filmadora Chapultepec)

*El monstruo en la sombra*

Dir: Zacarías Gómez Urquiza  
(Producciones Cub-Mex)

---

1955      *La Doncella de Piedra*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(Filmadora Chapultepec)

**Historia de un amor**

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(Internacional Cinematográfica)

*La escondida*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(Alfa Films)

*Canasta de cuentos mexicanos*

Dir: Julio Bracho  
(José Kohn)

*La Tierra del Fuego se apaga*

Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Mapol)

1956      *Una cita de amor*  
Dir: Emilio Fernández  
(Cinematográfica Latino Americana y Unipromex)

*Sueños de oro*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías and Suevia Films)

---

**El bolero de Raquel**

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films Internacional)

*Mujer en Condominio*

Dir: Rogelio A González  
(Cinematográfica Latinoamericana and Ramex Films)

1957 *Aquí está Heraclio Bernal*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(Cinematográfica Cumbre)

**La venganza de Heraclio Bernal**

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(Cinematográfica Cumbre)

*La rebelión de la sierra*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(Cinematográfica Cumbre)

*Flor de mayo*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(Cinematográfica Latino Americana)

*Una golfa*

Dir: Tulio Demicheli  
(Producciones México)

*La sonrisa de la Virgen*

Dir: Roberto Rodríguez  
(Películas Rodríguez)

---

1958      *Carabina 30-30*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(Filmadora Chapultepec and Galindo Hermanos)

*Impaciencia del corazón*  
Dir: Tito Davison  
(Filmadora Chapultepec and Galindo Hermanos)

*Café Colón*  
Dir: Benito Alazraki  
(Filmadora Chapultepec and Galindo Hermanos)

**Isla para dos**

Dir: Tito Davison  
(F. Mier S.A.)

*Nazarín*  
Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

1958      *La cucaracha*  
Dir: Ismael Rodríguez  
(Películas Rodríguez)

*La estrella vacía*  
Dir: Emilio Gómez Muriel  
(Producciones Corsa)

---

1959      *Sonatas*  
Dir: Juan Antonio Bardem (Con Cecilio Paniagua)  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

*Los ambiciosos (La fièvre monte à El Pao)*

---

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Filmex and Films Broderie)

*Macario*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(CLASA films)

1960      *The Young One (La joven)*  
Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Producciones Olmeca)

**Juana Gallo**

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

1961      *La Rosa Blanca*  
Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*Ánimas Trujano*

(Un Hombre Importante)  
Dir: Ismael Rodríguez  
(Películas Rodríguez)



---

*El tejedor de milagros*

Dir: Francisco del Villar  
(Sagitario Films)

1962 *El ángel exterminador*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Gustavo Alatríste)

*Días de otoño*

Dir: Roberto Gavaldón  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

1963 *El hombre de papel*

Dir: Ismael Rodríguez  
(Ismael Rodríguez)

*Entrega inmediata*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)

**En la mitad del mundo**

Dir: Ramón Pereda  
(Productora Ecuador)

*The Night of the Iguana*

Dir: John Huston

1964 *Escuela para solteras*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

---

*El gallo de oro*

Dir: Roberto Galvadón  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*Los tres calaveras*

Dir: Fernando Cortés  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*Los cuatro Juanes*

Dir: Miguel Zacarías  
(Producciones Zacarías)

*Simón del Desierto*

Dir: Luis Buñuel  
(Gustavo Alatríste)

1965

*Un alma pura*

Dir: Juan Ibañez  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

*Las dos Elenas*

Dir: José Luis Ibañez  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

*Lola de mi vida*

Dir: Miguel Barbachano Ponce  
(Producciones Barbachano Ponce)

**Cargamento prohibido**

Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)

---

*¡Viva Benito Canales!*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado

(Películas Mundiales and TV Producciones)

1966

*Pedro Páramo*

Dir: Carlos Velo

(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*El asesino se embarca*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado

(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*El escapulario*

Dir: Servando González

(Producciones Yanco)

*Domingo salvaje*

Dir: Francisco del Villar

(Sagitario Films)

1966

*El cuarto chino*

(The Chinese Room)

Dir: Albert Zugsmith

(Famous Players Co. with CLASA Films Mundiales and Sagitario Films)

*Su excelencia*

Dir: Miguel M Delgado

---

(POSA Films)

*Los ángeles de Puebla*

Dir: Francisco del Villar

(Producciones Bueno)

1967

*El jinete fantasma*

Dir: Albert Zugsmith

(Famous Players Co. with CLASA Films Mundiales and Sagitario Films)

*Mariana*

Dir: Juan Guerrero

(Juan Guerrero)

*Corazón Salvaje*

Dir: Tito Davison

(CLASA Films Mundiales with Durona Productions and Contra Cuadro)

*¿La Pax?*

Dir: Wolf Rilla

(Comité Organizador de los XIX Juegos Olímpicos)

1968

*El terrón de azúcar/The Big Cube*

Dir: Tito Davison

(Producciones Anco and Motion Picture International)

*Narda o el verano*

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- Dir: Juan Guerrero  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)
- 1969      *Two Mules for Sister Sarah*  
Dir: Don Siegel  
(Universal Pictures)
- 1970      *Kelly's Heroes*  
Dir: Brian C Hutton  
(Metro Goldwyn Meyer)
- La generala*  
Dir: Juan Ibañez  
(CLASA Films Mundiales)
- El cielo y tú*  
Dir: Gilberto Gazcón  
(Producciones Brooks)
- El profe*  
Dir: Miguel M Delgado  
(POSA Films)
- 1971      *Los hijos de Satanás*  
Dir: Rafael Balédón  
(Producciones Brooks)
- Hijazo de mi vidaza*  
Dir: Rafael Baledón  
(Oro Films)

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*María*

Dir: Tito Davison

(Ramón Pereda and CLASA Films Mundiales)

1972

*El monasterio de los buitres*

Dir: Francisco del Villar

(Estudios Churubusco and Francisco del Villar)

*El señor de Osanto*

Dir: Jaime Humberto Hermosillo

(Estudios Churubusco)

**Once a Scoundrel**

Dir: George Shaefer

(Carlyle Productions)

*Interval*

Dir: Daniel Mann

(Euro-American and Estudios Churubusco)

1973

*El amor tiene cara de mujer*

Dir: Tito Davison

(CLASA Films Mundiales)

*Los perros de Dios*

Dir: Francisco del Villar

(Estudios Churubusco)

1974

*El llanto de la tortuga*

Dir: Francisco del Villar

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(CONACINE)

*Presagio*

Dir: Luis Alcoriza

(CONACINE and Producciones Escorpión)

1975

*Coronación*

Dir: Sergio Olhovich

(CONACINE and CLASA Films Mundiales)

*La vida cambia*

Dir: José Estrada

(CONACINE and STPC)

*Maten al León*

Dir: José Estrada

(CONACINE and DASA)

*Cananea*

Dir: Marcela Fernández Violante

(CONACINE)

1975

*Los aztecas*

Dir: Marcel Boudou

(TV France)

1977

*Divinas palabras*

Dir: Juan Ibañez

(CONACINE)

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*La casa del pelícano*

Dir: Sergio Véjar  
(CONACINE)

*Los hijos de Sánchez*

Dir: Hal Barlett  
(CONACINE)

*D.F.*

Dir: Rogelio González  
(CONACINE)

*Te quiero*

Dir: Tito Davison  
(CONACINE)

1978

*A paso de cojo*

Dir: Luis Alcoriza  
(CONACINE and Producciones Escorpión)

*Casa Pedro Domecq*

Dir: Juan Ibáñez  
(commercial)

1980

*El jugador de ajedrez*

Dir: Juan Luis Buñuel  
(TV France)

*México mágico*

Dir: Alejandro Tavera



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Raúl Zermeño/Luis Mandoki

1981

*México 2000*

Dir: Rogelio González  
(CONACINE)

*El heroe desconocido*

Dir: Julián Pastor  
(Televisine S.A. de C.V.)

1983

*El corazón de la noche*

Dir: Jaime Humberto Hermosillo  
(Conacite Uno)

*Under the Volcano*

Dir: John Huston  
(Conacite Uno and Ithaca)

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